

# MEAT

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## A NATURAL SYMBOL

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# Abstract

In Britain, and in cultures around the world, meat's significance extends beyond what might be anticipated from its nutritional utility. By looking at the academic and popular literature, and through a series of loosely-structured interviews, this study investigates the range of ideas that people hold about meat in modern Britain for evidence as to what it is that makes animal flesh such an esteemed foodstuff.

The principle conclusion is that meat's pre-eminence derives from its being a "natural" choice for human societies to use to express their control over the natural environment — a value which has long been important in Western culture. It is for this reason, for example, that we commonly relate the origins of "civilised" humanity to the beginnings of hunting or of farming, and this is likewise why meat has been a symbol of affluence, strength, and virility.

Our proscription of cannibalism, our unwillingness to eat pets, and the common reference to meat in sexual symbolism, are all shown to conform to this analysis. The principle of environmental control is also shown to be a significant factor underpinning our more usual explanations of trends in the meat system. Economics; health and nutrition; ethical and religious influences; and ecological concerns, are all shown to have a significant symbolic component in addition to their overtly practical meaning.

## DECLARATION

I have composed this thesis myself on the basis of my own work.

Nick Fiddes  
28 October 1989

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## Foreword

IT IS DIFFICULT NOW TO REMEMBER the spirit in which I began this study. As I recall it came out of a vague, but distinct, curiosity deriving from various episodes in my past. I have a vivid memory of a childhood holiday in France — I must have been about six at the time — when we children befriended a calf to which we gave the name Paddington, and my confusion on learning that we might well be eating Paddington before long, once he had grown up a little more. I now know that the shock I felt is something that many, perhaps most, children in our society experience at some stage. I have been surprised at the numbers of parents encountered in the course of this study who related the story of their offspring's rebellion against meat, at whatever age. In my case, as with most children, I soon learned to accept the situation as normality.

I remember later conversations with my parents about why we call cows "beef" and pigs "pork" when they appear on the dinner plate — I must by now have been about ten or twelve. The precise explanation offered I do not now recall, except that it was somehow felt more polite to use these terms than their literal equivalents. This my youthful pride found difficult to accept: if we're going to eat cows and pigs, then why not be honest about it? Why try to dress it up as something else, as if we are afraid of facing the truth? I never did receive a satisfactory answer, and took a somewhat mischievous delight in occasionally referring to meat as "dead animal" in situations where well-brought up children should not have done so.

As a teenager, the memory of a geography lesson comes to mind, when our teacher passed around a photocopied sheet about world food production, and the feeling of amazement that lingered for days on learning that there was no shortage of food in the world, but that the mass-starvation of which I had long been aware was largely the result of unequal distribution. I had a similar feeling some years later in a geography lecture at university on learning about the ecological inefficiency of a large population eating "high

on the food chain": that it makes about ten times more sense in efficiency terms to eat the grain itself than to feed it to cows and then eat them.

Years later still, while running a catering business with a partner, one contract we received was for a week-long academic workshop/ conference in Edinburgh on the subject of meat. The idea was for the food we prepared each day to complement the discussions, with leaflets accompanying each meal describing the dishes on offer. As caterers we were thus accorded participant status, and were kept in touch with the proceedings. The most striking thing I learnt in the process was how *little* was known about the social aspects of the phenomenon of meat eating. Arguments ranged around nutritional, historical, economic, political, and environmental influences, but it was clear that none of these could sufficiently explain the centrality of meat in the conventional diet — yet no one seemed able to offer more than anecdotal evidence about *why* meat was so important in the first place.

But, in the end, I think the most significant influence that stimulated me to enter into this enquiry was an even more personal one. For many years I had been aware that many of my friends were vegetarian, and yet I was not. I knew many convincing arguments against meat eating, and yet I had never felt willing or able to give up meat. Sometimes I felt that I should, but could not, and so felt a sort of guilt at my lack of will and moral failure. At other times I reasoned that it was perfectly natural and not unhealthy in moderation, so why worry? The result was a constant internal struggle, and general unease. I wanted to know why this issue had the power to confuse me so much.

After discussions with a range of academics, I chose to work in a department of Social Anthropology. This offered a promising perspective from which to review our food habits, with its tradition of seeking to investigate the meaning of people's ideas and behaviour with as few preconceptions as possible. Although the discipline has traditionally been associated with other cultures, a similar orientation is also appropriate to the study of our own.

What I have found out has forced me to re-assess much about my entire life, though, strangely, perhaps not so much in my attitude to meat itself, as in my approach to many other things: about the ways in which we behave towards each other and towards the habitat which sustains us. I feel that I have had to come face-to-face with an aspect of my identity of which I had previously been largely unaware, and that I might otherwise have continued to prefer not to recognise. Indeed, I now believe the very fact that most of us choose not to recognise certain important aspects of the meaning of our words and deeds to be significant in itself.



The analysis that follows is an attempt to assemble a broad range of evidence of the many ways in which we think about meat, talk about meat, and use meat — to look beyond the façade of the generally recognised, and to construct a coherent interpretation which accounts also for those ideas which are less often made explicit, but which may be effective nonetheless. This is an anthropological study of meat but it is also, from a particular angle, an ethnography of “us”: a society in the process of change.

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MY SINCERE THANKS are due to everyone who has given me advice, assistance, motivation, and money. In particular I wish to thank Anna Ashmole for inspiring me to set out on this study, for her support and advice as it progressed, and for still being around to help so much at the end; Dr Alan Campbell and Dr Mary Noble for being such excellent supervisors, and more; my parents, Brian and Dorothy Fiddes for their unstinting love and support, and especially my mother for proof-reading; Ulrich and Francesca Loening at the Edinburgh University Centre for Human Ecology for stimulating me to consider this topic; all my friends for their invaluable comments, cuttings, and encouragement; and not least my many informants for giving so freely of their time and patience. I am also eternally grateful for the support of the Carnegie Trust; Fitch Lovell plc; the Konrad Zweig Trust; Greg Sams; the University of Edinburgh Vans Dunlop scholarship committee; and the Vegetarian Society.

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# Introduction

THIS WORK IS ABOUT MEAT. It is about what parts of which animals we habitually eat, when we eat meat, where we eat it, and with whom we eat it. Principally, it is about why we eat it, or why we do not. The central aims are to suggest, firstly, how meat has come to be the special food it is in Britain today, and, secondly, why certain changes in our eating habits may be happening now.

The answers to these questions may seem so obvious as to be scarcely worth questioning. It is easily taken for granted that meat is an important part of the diet because it is high in strength-giving protein, and simply because when cooked it tastes good and is satisfying. The fact of changes in eating habits are likewise routinely explained as fashion, or by reference to worries about high levels of saturated fats, or chemical residues, or perhaps about the cruelty involved in intensive husbandry... "Where is the problem?", one might ask.

Such commonsense beliefs must be questioned, since what seems natural fact to us, in our particular society, at this particular time, is exposed as cultural orthodoxy when set against the range of beliefs and practices of other societies and in history. Many people live healthily with little or no meat in their diets. Others subsist almost exclusively upon it. And, as the meat industry is quick to point out, the health fears about eating meat seem, sometimes at least, to be clearly out of proportion to the real physical threat involved. Why are health concerns about the allegedly high fat content of meat being expressed now, when elsewhere it might have been fashionable to be fat, or else believed that meat eating made one thin? Why, whilst they have become less expensive as a proportion of average income, have purchases of the traditionally prestigious red meats been falling? And why have ethical concerns recently come to prominence, when for years most people have been happy to consume animal products without such worries? Our conventional explanations are not entirely adequate. Fuller answers must be sought by interpretation of what meat stands for in our culture.

THE TITLE OF THIS WORK suggests that meat is a "Natural Symbol". This plays on Mary Douglas' work about bodily symbolism entitled *Natural Symbols* (1970), in which she showed how the human body is an immediately accessible and therefore natural metaphor for the expression of social experience. In similar vein, the global occurrence of certain ideas suggests that they may tend to arise by the very "nature" of meat. This should not be surprising. We know that, biologically, food selection and consumption are highly significant — Young, for example, argues that "food is about the most important influence in determining the organization of the brain and the behaviour that the brain dictates" (1968: 21). We know that societies use systems of classification to regulate their internal and external relations (eg. Douglas, ed., 1973). This work suggests that our use of meat as a food reflects our categorisation of, and our relations towards, animal competitors, companions and resources. Perhaps then it is only "natural" that meat should be so widely selected for special social or ritual significance, even if only by its avoidance.

Calling meat a "Natural Symbol" also, however, refers to the central organising idea of the work. The analysis is centred upon the argument that the most important feature of meat — which endows it with both its positive image as prestigious and vital nutrition, and simultaneously its contrary image as dangerously immoral and potentially unhealthy — is that it tangibly represents human control of the natural world. Through much of British history, and Western history in general, human subjugation of nature has been a central theme, and I shall show that consumption of animal flesh is an ideal exemplar of that control. Despite our rationalisations and refinements, modern scientific civilisation is no exception to this; meat still derives its peculiar significance from these basic ideas. In this sense too, meat is a Natural Symbol.

THE WORK IS ARRANGED in four main parts. The first part deals with the Background to the study, introducing the twin problems addressed in more detail: firstly, the curious way in which, time and again around the world, meat is a particularly valued food, sometimes to the point of being the only "real" food; and, in Chapter 2, changes in meat consumption habits which have occurred over the years. In Chapter 3 it is argued that the notion of "taste" reflects — rather than explains — preferences. The notion of "symbolism" as it is used in this study is discussed in Chapter 4.

The second part, *Meat is Muscle*, presents and expands the main argument of the analysis: that the high value of meat is largely contingent upon its symbolic importance as



a tangible representation of human control of, and superiority over, nature. The fifth chapter looks at how we habitually relate the origins of the human species, and of human civilisation, to the advent of hunting and of farming respectively. Chapter 6 investigates the history of affirmations of human supremacy, and the importance of blood as a symbol of that supremacy, and then demonstrates the extent to which these values permeate each stage of the meat production and consumption system. In Chapter 7 an alternative ethos is described, in which humanity is conceived of as complementary to nature, rather than opposed to it; it is shown that this rival viewpoint has also influenced the meat system through much of Western history, and is expressed by our growing repugnance to reminders of meat's animal origins.

Mixed Meataphors, the third main part of the work, deals with some aspects of the meat system whose significance we seldom recognise. It shows how the symbolic importance of meat as an expression of environmental control accounts for peculiar details of the British food system that might otherwise seem merely obscure. Arens's contention that there may be no such thing as cannibalism is explored in Chapter 8, and shown to conform to the traditional Western orthodoxy that anything non-human is "fair game" (unless proscribed for other reasons). This principle is then extended in Chapter 9 to explain our reluctance to eat pets, or animals that are otherwise classified as close to humans. In Chapter 10 it is suggested why meat should figure so regularly in sexual imagery in the English language.

Whereas that third part deals with aspects of the meat system which are more meaningful than we commonly realise, the fourth and final main part of the work deals with the standard explanations for the status of meat — our *Meatologiques Modernes* — and shows them each to have important symbolic aspects in addition to their overt and obvious meanings. Economics is one of the most pervasive influences of our age, but in Chapter 11 it is shown that this cannot explain the high value of meat — but merely quantifies it. The sources of that esteem must be sought elsewhere, and these are again related to meat's allusive function. Chapter 12 suggests that our health is likewise not the straightforward causative process of nutrition and contagion that we often assume; perceptions of the healthiness of meat express wider concerns about our relationship with the world that sustains us. In Chapter 13 various ethical and religious views of meat are discussed, and again are shown to reflect power relationships. Finally, Chapter 14 looks at some of the many ways in which meat production has recently been indicted as ecologically damaging — an involvement that is both literal and metaphorical.

A concluding section sums up the principle findings, and speculates about possible future trends in the meat system.

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## Approach

SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGISTS have traditionally been concerned with localised study of small communities. The focus of this work, however, is not the ethnographic representation of the range of ideas of a small group of people, but rather the study of a particular idea among a large, heterogeneous community. The idea, or topic, is meat; the population, modern Britain. Other societies and other periods are mentioned for illumination or contrast, while the data for modern Britain are, of course, gathered from individuals, not from the nation. Similarly, although the topic is meat, the context is the broader food system, and I also sometimes consider particular meats in detail. I should therefore explain my focus upon the level of resolution of "meat" in "modern Britain".

No single scale exists at which human culture, and the environment in which it operates, should uniquely be viewed. There is something, however disputed its definition, that can be described as global humanity, and there is a global environment. Each describes a generalised abstraction made up of smaller systems. One can discuss Western or European culture; or British; or Scottish; or Edinburgh society. More locally still, one could examine the culture of one business, club, or local community. Or one might investigate a single individual. Each focus could be set in its own typical social and physical environment. But, at whatever scale selected, there remains an inevitable process of generalisation. The anthropologist who has spent twenty years among a community of twenty households can still make only abstract observations about their "people". Even at the individual scale, there is no realistic prospect of access to the entire set of beliefs, and no necessary consistency of argument in detail: momentary mood will still make it impossible to achieve a full ethnography — or psychoanalysis — of even one person's ideas.

Whatever the scale selected for study, it is necessary to set the system in its wider context, and to acknowledge the existence of internal diversity. It would of course be possible to focus a study of the ideology of meat at a local scale, researching within a finite community, with due reference to the wider influence of Western society where appropriate. Without such reference, however, it would be difficult to make sense of any



group's collective representations — their ways of thought — since modern media of communication ensure the circulation of ideas ever more rapidly and more widely. There can be few, if any, places in the United Kingdom today that are not substantially influenced by national and international trends. Even on Fair Isle, for example, whose residents claim to be Britain's most isolated community, informants readily acknowledged that the local diet had changed considerably in recent years, in line with "modern thinking", due to such influences as radio and television, magazines, visitors, and immigration and emigration. A detailed study of any such community might make interesting observations about local perceptions of meat (which do indeed differ in detail from national norms), but could not hope to explain the significance of their ideas without making reference to the wider cultural context, any more than it would be possible to properly understand the weather experienced at one moment by a single individual without, for example, considering both such small scale variables as the buildings nearby which affect air turbulence, and the prevailing climatic conditions at local, national, and global levels.

The question then becomes, what is the most *appropriate* scale at which to consider a particular phenomenon. Today, more than ever before, the processes of meat supply and consumption operate at a national, if not an international, scale. Essentially similar ideas are broadcast through the various information media and received throughout the land, and regulations and marketing strategies are likewise increasingly formulated centrally. The pervasive influence of this shared body of ideas should not be underestimated. This is not to imply that Britons' ideas about meat are necessarily uniform — as Anthony Cohen insists, "we can treat societies, cultures, as barely generalizable aggregates of difference rather than as fictive matrices of uniformity" (Cohen, 1989: 10). But it does suggest that a significant pattern of ideas exists which can be represented usefully at the national scale. The loss of a "complete" local ethnography in intricate detail is compensated for by the improved representation of ideas in common currency that form the context for individual cosmologies.

WE DEFINE MEAT as the flesh of animals destined for our consumption. According to the the book of Genesis (i. 28) it is potentially derived from "every living thing" that moves, though we classify many creatures, including those of our own species, out of normal consideration. I do not intend to define meat any more closely for the purposes of this study. To do so would only invite unnecessary definitional dilemmas such as those which confront researchers into vegetarianism, who have found it necessary to distinguish, firstly, those who who avoid only red meat, from those who avoid also poultry, from those who avoid

also fish, dairy produce, animal products, and so on (eg. Dwyer *et al*, 1973). Fine distinctions, and a scientific terminology of ovolactovegetarians and pescovegetarians and the like, are doubtless vital in some contexts, but are not the concern of this study. One informant for this study would eat red meat but not fish; another would eat poultry but avoided dairy products; another was concerned about the phylogenetic classification of the yeast in his daily bread. Such permutations of habit cannot be, and need not be, conveniently reconciled within a single neat categorisation.

Meat, instead, is taken to mean simply that which people regard as meat. If one person regards only beef to be meat then that, for them, is what meat is. If another includes also lamb, poultry, game and fish then so too, for that person, that is the definition of meat. Thus, on the whole, in the context of Britain and most Western societies, the word applies most commonly to so-called red meats — the flesh of domesticated cows and sheep — and also to pork and to game. Poultry, and especially fish, is rather less “meat” to many people (some reasons for which will be considered later), and is accordingly more peripheral to this study, though is by no means excluded. The subject under scrutiny is not the substance, but the concept. Meat, for the purposes of this work, is just what you, and I, and the informants interviewed for this study, refer to as meat.

On a similar basis to the above discussion of geographical scale, it would be possible to study the concept of meat at various scales. One might, for example, focus especially upon the acceptability of different cuts of, say, venison, or on different cooking and serving treatments. However, although there will be some discussion, where relevant, of attitudes to particular meats in Britain, more detailed consideration of the reasons for particular likes and dislikes has already been attempted elsewhere (Simoons, 1967), and largely falls outwith this research. Likewise, the wider food system is only discussed where relevant to the principle subject of the work.

THIS IS NOT A STUDY OF VEGETARIANISM. Nonetheless, references to it will be found throughout the text. This is because meat eating and vegetarianism are two sides of the same coin — each being significant in opposition to the other. Research into vegetarianism, such as the example cited above, generally encounters a problem of definition: how to classify the variety of beliefs and motivations that are offered as explanations for that inclination. This commonly leaves writers baffled for lack of a uniting factor. The error is twofold: firstly, in expecting the term “vegetarianism” to have a single definitive characteristic, rather than a range of possible features: which Needham refers to as a polythetic array of serial and more complex resemblances (1983: 36-65). But secondly, and



more importantly, the problem is in looking for the nature of the preference within vegetarianism itself, when its definition, in the end, lies not in what it is, but in what it is not.

Vegetarians do not eat meat (or, at least, some meats). Although it is often overlooked, the one and only attribute which characterises all vegetarians, regardless of race, creed, class, gender, age, or occupation, is their avoidance of animal flesh in their diet. Thus, transparently, the question of what motivates vegetarians can only be adequately answered by considering what motivates meat eaters — what it is about meat that makes people want to eat it — since rejection of such beliefs is the one thing that vegetarians have in common. (I exclude those who eat meat gladly but rarely because of its expense).

The absence of more than superficial consideration of the reasons for meat eating in much of the literature on vegetarianism may lie partly in the conventional assumption of the majority of the population that meat is a normal, natural, part of the diet, and vegetarianism an aberration to be explained. Indeed, in British society, until recently, that has broadly been the case. Children have traditionally been brought up to regard consuming the flesh of other animals for food as both normal and desirable. Meat eating is part of what Bourdieu calls our “habitus” — it is a principle unquestioned by most people (Bourdieu, 1977). That this traditional view is implicit in much published research is obvious from the language commonly used: of “faddism”, “rebelliousness”, or “deviance”. It would be easy to find any number of people who would agree that vegetarianism is generally ideological, if not overtly political. It would be harder to persuade most of those same people that meat eating is likewise. Nonetheless, any study of food habits must recognise that food selection is imbued with social rules and meaning, and it is clear from the extent of its association with cultural rituals, both religious and secular, that meat is a medium particularly rich in social meaning. From an academic viewpoint, therefore, a prejudice in favour of the majority is unsatisfactory. All that can be said is that food habits differ, and the meat eating habit requires explanation as much as does the non-meat eating habit.

This research focuses on meat, and in the process helps to explain why increasing numbers of individuals in recent years have been avoiding meat in their diets. Conversely, study of the beliefs of vegetarians is a prerequisite to properly understanding the phenomenon of meat consumption. With a habit such as meat eating, which has traditionally been so taken-for-granted as to be seen as the natural order, the ideas which underpin the belief can be hard to elucidate. However, by bringing into consideration also the ideas of those who reject the tenets of meat eating, it is made more possible, by

opposition, also to isolate some of the distinctive features of that set of beliefs and values. Our attitudes to meat, I suggest, are a reflection of our world view, and changing habits in meat consumption may well indicate a changing perception of the world we inhabit.

THIS STUDY IS FOUNDED UPON SEVERAL PREMISES. The first is that we select our food, as we select all goods, according to social imperatives at least as much as according to biological needs. "It is standard ethnographic practice to assume that all material possessions carry social meanings and to concentrate a main part of cultural analysis upon their use as communicators... The material possessions provide food and covering, and this has to be understood. But at the same time it is apparent that the goods have another important use: they also make and maintain social relationships" (Douglas & Isherwood, 1980: 59-60). Douglas and Isherwood stress that goods are no less social currency in our own modern, supposedly rational, society than in any other culture studied by anthropologists.

In other words, when we decide what to eat we do not merely satisfy our nutritional requirements in what we believe is the most efficient way possible from the resources potentially available, but we act in a cultural environment. Our ideas reflect, for example, individual and group classifications of what is recognised as food, and what is not food. These categories may be influenced by physiological and environmental truths, but reality is always interpreted in a cultural context, and other social aspects including religion, myth, and personal prejudice also contribute. Ideas combine to govern food choice. The study investigates the system of ideas associated with meat in the conviction that the sum of symbolic meanings, in their environmental-nutritional context, ultimately determines the value of meat to society.

It is simple to argue that food consumption is imbued with a potentially infinite range of symbolic meanings; it is another thing to investigate and analyse those meanings. There remains the problem of bringing to conscious clarity the various common meanings of symbolic forms, by no means all of which are recognised, let alone have reasoned explanations.

The second premise of this study is that symbolic ideas which are important within a culture at more than an idiosyncratic or local group level clearly circulate in some way, and are broadly understood, even if they are not normally made explicit. We may each form our own ideas according to our personal history of experiences, but for a particular idea about any food to gain wider currency, it must somehow pass between groups and individuals in a form that can be widely assimilated and interpreted.



Following on from this, the third assumption is that if such symbolic meanings are effectively communicated, then they can be brought out into the open for analysis and interpretation. This is the work of social science. The ideas to do with meat that are received by the individual in society as he or she grows up, and which thereafter to a greater or lesser extent influence his or her habits, as well as new ideas that evolve in response to changing circumstances, must in some way be communicated between individuals and such ideas can then be identified.

The aim must be, then, to intercept both the concepts and viewpoints that people openly acknowledge, and their accepted explanations, and also the more implicit notions and meanings that are likewise transmitted and received, but which normally, for one reason or another, are not fully articulated.

This clearly requires a considerable degree of interpretation in assessing the meaning of cultural forms; it cannot simply be a matter of collecting data. If we were to be content with the explanations that already exist then the task could be approached as a standard market research survey. However, such surveys can enquire only into that which is recognised by the informant, not that which normally escapes notice. It is here that interpretation is necessary. As Sperber puts it:

The project of a scientific anthropology meets with a major difficulty: it is impossible to describe a cultural phenomenon, an election, a mass, or a football game for instance, without taking into account the ideas of the participants. However, ideas cannot be observed, but only intuitively understood; they cannot be described, but only interpreted (Sperber, 1985: 9).

The objective therefore has been, firstly, to isolate and identify as many as possible of the ideas, concepts, meanings, symbols, views, associations and metaphors, that are generally used in connection with the substance of meat — this may mean, for example, words and associations found in the context of meat supply and meat eating, or it may mean contexts in which meat is referred to; and secondly, to consider how far these ideas are systematic — that is, the extent to which the various concepts are disparate and perhaps contradictory, or else can be regarded as belonging to a coherent set (or sets) of related meanings. One test of the analysis must be whether its implications adequately accord with statistical trends in meat consumption.

It is not intended to imply that the symbolic notions associated with animal flesh provide a total explanation for the consumption patterns that exist. Clearly other factors such as nutrition and economics do play a significant rôle too. However, it is also clear that

these are not straightforward causal forces, but are invariably subject to interpretation in contexts influenced by received ideas. This analysis is an attempt to redress the balance, and to demonstrate the importance of a social side of food habits which is all-too-often overlooked by a society convinced of its sophisticated rationality.

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# Methodology

THE EXPRESS AIM OF THIS STUDY is to identify and interpret as many as possible of the diverse range of ideas about meat held by different individuals and groups within what may broadly be referred to as British society. The methodology is predicated upon the belief that for an idea to be of more than idiosyncratic importance, it must be circulated in some way, and that if ideas are communicated then they can be intercepted.

Ideas can be received and transmitted in any number of ways, and any medium of communication must be regarded as potentially significant and therefore worthy of consideration — particularly in a country such as modern Britain which is increasingly characterised by its information technology. My approach to data sources is therefore eclectic.

The information presented can, however, be considered as falling within three broad categories. The first is academic material, the primary function of which is, of course, as a source of intellectual inspiration, contributing to the development of analytical arguments. However, such material may simultaneously be seen as a source of ethnographic data for analysis. In other words, any author's words can be considered at face value for their analytical contribution, but also as a representation of a particular cultural viewpoint. Even apparently objective data sources such as official statistical analyses exhibit this two-fold quality. Their very definitions of, for example, which meats are classed separately and which together, or what is healthy and what is unhealthy, impart information about the questioners as well as about the questioned.

The second broad source of data is what may be termed the popular media, including radio and television, newspapers and magazines, novels, school textbooks, public lectures, computer databases, posters and leaflets, and any other channel through which information is in any way publicly communicated. Such items derive partly from searches through sources of likely material, but just as often from chance occurrences, and from cuttings passed on by friends. And just as academic sources should be regarded as data for



analysis in addition to their intellectual contribution, popular sources may also contribute both analyses and direct data.

The third main source of information were informants. These are individuals especially approached in order to elicit information, and discuss ideas, for this study. Most of the informant-quotations embedded in the text (in indented italics) derive from a series of approximately fifty semi-formal interviews conducted over a period of two years (1987-1989). Geographically, these range from the South of England to the Shetland Isles, although the majority took place in the Edinburgh area. Interviews were normally tape-recorded and transcribed, except where circumstances did not permit.

Also crucial to the development of ideas and analysis were the countless informal conversations in which one inevitably participates whilst conducting such research, whilst shopping, at parties... whilst living a normal life as a member of the society being studied. Although only a few such conversations have been reproduced in the text from memory, their value was inestimable. The work would also be very much the thinner without the innumerable press cuttings and references provided by friends and colleagues.

THE FIRST PHASE OF INTERVIEWS, for roughly half the period of study, was aimed at reaching a rough cross-section of the population in order to elicit as wide a variety of viewpoints as possible. While never intending to make statistical statements on the basis of such a small sample, the object was to include at least one informant from each category of a grid stratified by three broad socio-economic groups (on the basis of occupation), three adult age-bands, and by gender.

To accomplish this, a questionnaire was devised (Appendix 1) with which to approach members of the public. After an initial test-run of a dozen questionnaires, and consequent revision of some questions, street-surveys were then conducted in a shopping plaza and in the foyer of a public library, with randomly-selected individuals (on the basis of the fifth or tenth person — according to the rate of human traffic — to pass by after completion of the previous interview).

The overt aim of the questionnaire was to obtain data on individual's eating habits in general, and meat eating habits in particular, as well as about other aspects of their lives. Respondents were also encouraged to volunteer information not immediately prompted by the questions set. The additional, and in fact primary, purpose was simply to establish contact and confidence. After the questions, which lasted about four to five

minutes, each respondent was given a message of thanks printed on Edinburgh University headed notepaper, with a brief explanation of the aims of the study, also to establish confidence.

The individual was then asked whether, if selected, they would be willing to take part in a follow-up discussion at any convenient time and venue. About two-thirds gave addresses or telephone numbers through which to be contacted.

About two hundred questionnaires were conducted over the period, in batches of thirty to fifty, from which a sample was selected for following up. Some were selected to satisfy the requirements of the stratification by age, sex, and socio-economic group, and others for particular characteristics which the initial interviews had appeared to identify, such as high or low levels of meat eating, high or low levels of ownership of consumer durables, or other curious circumstances such as a vegetarian woman regularly providing for a meat-eating family.

The latter stratagem in selecting informants proved particularly worthwhile in the context of a study limited in duration and resources, since it duly transpired as the extended interviews (described below) progressed that those individuals chosen for their apparently distinct viewpoints, were contributing a considerably greater diversity of ideas to the analysis than those selected more randomly. Since the stated aim of the study was to search out the variety of views and ideas held, and not to aim to make statistical generalisations on the basis of these interviews, this seemed to be a successful approach.

INTERVIEWS THROUGHOUT THIS FIRST PHASE of investigation were invariably conducted at the informant's home, or place of work. This was always, of course, at the invitation of the individual concerned, and perhaps surprisingly the question of venue was never a problem.

The advantages of meeting at an informant's home were several. Firstly, it seemed desirable to put people, who had been kind enough to agree to spend their time on discussing matters of no immediate advantage to themselves, to as little inconvenience as possible. Secondly, it seems likely that many people will be more relaxed and therefore more communicative in their familiar environment, rather than in, say, a university office. Another significant advantage was that access into an informant's home made it possible to gain clues as to details of their life, such as photographs, books, trophies, kitchen equipment, and decoration, which were useful in conducting relaxed conversations.



With the exception of one individual in the second phase of interviews, no informant expressed strong reservations when asked (soon after arrival) whether it would be permissible to (unobtrusively) tape-record the discussion, and invariably after a few minutes of conversation no great reticence on account of the recording seemed detectable. The use of tape not only enabled verbatim transcription of the discussion for later analysis and precise quotation, but also allowed conversation to proceed freely without either participant's attention being distracted by the taking of notes.

The latter aspect had another important benefit which became clear on occasions, for example when the tape-recorder batteries ran flat, or when the one informant did refuse permission, when note-taking did become necessary. The action of writing anything down whilst an informant was speaking had the effect of alerting them to the fact that what they were saying was for some reason of particular interest. This might often not matter, but equally at times it was obvious that the flow of speech was slowing down as the person wondered what it was that was worth making note of. Tape recording, on the other hand, enabled a respondent's most interesting (although to them entirely unremarkable) views and expressions to be met by a straight face and casual encouragement, where that seemed most suitable.

The intention of the first phase of interviews was to allow conversation to proceed as undirected as possible, beyond pursuing points raised by the informant in order to clarify their meaning. Only rarely were ideas deliberately introduced for discussion, and then usually only towards the end of the interview. This was to negate as far as possible the likelihood of interviewer bias, and to permit the informant's views to emerge, rather than the researcher's — an aim that was particularly important at this initial stage of developing an analytical approach.

To this end no predetermined questions were formulated. Instead conversation was not necessarily about meat, or even food, at all, but about anything that one might discuss over a cup of tea with a relative stranger. It would often be the informant who initiated talk of their eating habits, aware that that was meant to be the formal topic of discussion, and throughout the interview conversation would usually alternate between meat and eating and other, commonly apparently irrelevant, topics. A successful stratagem, for example, was to allow conversation to lapse into a pensive silence for a few seconds, perhaps whilst sipping some tea and nibbling a biscuit. The silence would commonly be broken by the interviewee introducing a new line of thought or explanation to the conversation, which would almost certainly not have emerged through interrogation.



Though superficially inefficient in terms of time, this approach appeared desirable in order to prevent the agenda being determined by, and thus merely reflecting, the questions.

With the exception of certain differences in orientation which tend to distinguish men's viewpoints from women's, described later (Chapter 11), the interviews suggested no significant viewpoints peculiar to members of the groups stratified. Certainly it would be difficult to characterise any ideas as only working class, or uniquely held by young people. Differences in so far as they do exist seem to be in degree rather than in absolute terms. This impression is substantiated by statistical surveys such as the Gallup polls on vegetarianism conducted for the Realeat Company whose findings indicate only relatively minor differences in views and habits between age, sex, socio-economic and geographical categories.

A SECOND PHASE OF INTERVIEWS was targeted more particularly at individuals "representing" different aspects of society. These informants were not, of course, intended to be representative in the statistical sense, but were chosen to ensure that the greatest possible diversity of viewpoints had been allowed for.

A list of proposed interviewees was therefore drawn up, as follows. "Representing" the meat system it was thought desirable to interview an individual engaged in meat marketing; one individual with personal experience of slaughtering animals; a butcher; a farmer farming intensively, one farming relatively traditionally, and one engaged in organic or free-range production. For the anti-meat viewpoint, someone engaged full-time in promoting vegetarianism was sought; an animal rights campaigner; and an individual representing environmentalism. In addition, a doctor or nutritionist was wanted, as well as a holistic practitioner; a vet; someone who regularly enjoyed hunting to kill; a gourmet; and a restaurateur. Finally, on the list, were individuals representing major religious viewpoints: Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist.

The strategy for identifying and contacting each notional figure was, of course, different. The individual engaged in meat marketing, for example, was the managing director of a medium sized meat company who had responded to an early request for financial sponsorship by declining finance but offering information or other assistance if required. The vet was contacted through a notice-board advertisement at the local veterinary college. Many others were found through word-of-mouth recommendation, including from previous informants — a means of making contact with many advantages, such as overcoming initial suspicion or reluctance.

INTERVIEWS IN THIS SECOND PHASE were also normally conducted at the convenience of the informant, though due to the nature of the contacts this more often meant at their place of work than in the home.

These interviews were more structured than in the first phase, aiming to develop upon the lessons learned then. Consequently, for each informant, a series of topics for discussion and perhaps particular questions, were outlined in advance. The nature of these topics naturally varied according to the identity of the particular informant, but generally sought to determine their views in relation to the argument which was by then already being formulated on the basis of the first series of interviews. However, as before, enough unstructured space was allowed at each meeting to ensure that the informant's own ideas could also emerge, as well as their answering questions.

The aim of this more organised approach to data collection was twofold. Firstly, it ensured that a relatively large amount of information was collected in each interview. Secondly, introducing the central issues of the analysis into discussions with these key informants provided a critical test of the analysis as the study progressed. For example, towards the end of the interview with the meat company managing director, responses were elicited as to his views on vegetarianism and environmentalism — subjects which he would not of his own accord have mentioned. It was useful to establish that he viewed vegetarians as mainly nutritionally misguided and did not see morality as particularly relevant, and environmental concerns as largely media exaggeration and in any case as nothing to worry about that technology could not cope with — and that though business might adapt to consumer pressure where in its interests to do so, the “bottom line”, in the end, was creating a profit.

Except in a few cases, informants' words are incorporated into the text without systematic description of their identity, since their views are regarded as archetypes more than as individuals' beliefs. In this way the aim has been to build up a picture of how meat is thought of in modern British society.

# MEAT

## A NATURAL SYMBOL

### Background

CHAPTERS 1 & 2 DESCRIBE THE TWIN ISSUES ADDRESSED, WHILST CHAPTERS 3 & 4 OUTLINE SOME THEORETICAL THEMES NECESSARY TO THEIR INVESTIGATION.

#### 1. Food = Meat.....26

MEAT IS A SINGULARLY SIGNIFICANT FOODSTUFF — NOT JUST IN WESTERN SOCIETY BUT IN CULTURES AROUND THE WORLD. INDEED, MEAT SOMETIMES SEEMS ALMOST TO BE SYNONYMOUS WITH FOOD AS NOT ONLY THE BEST BUT THE ONLY REAL FOOD.

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HUMANS HAVE EATEN MEAT SINCE PREHISTORY, BUT CLEAR STATISTICS EXIST FOR ONLY THE PAST FEW GENERATIONS. IN EUROPE MEAT SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN A RELATIVELY RARE LUXURY UNTIL CONSUMPTION ROSE RAPIDLY AROUND THE TIME OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION. RECENTLY, HOWEVER, DEMAND HAS BEGUN TO FALL.

#### 3. A Matter of Taste .....44

THE FLAVOUR OF MOST FOODS IS NEITHER GOOD NOR BAD IN ANY ABSOLUTE SENSE. RATHER, WHETHER OR NOT WE ENJOY THE TASTE OF SOMETHING DEPENDS UPON OUR VIEW OF ITS DESIRABILITY. FLAVOUR CANNOT THEREFORE EXPLAIN OUR PREFERENCES.

#### 4. Symbolism .....53

MEAT IS A SYMBOLIC SUBSTANCE, BECAUSE IT REPRESENTS TO US MUCH MORE THAN ITS OBVIOUS UTILITARIAN VALUE OF NUTRITION. INDEED, THE FACT THAT OTHER IDEAS WHICH WE ASSOCIATE WITH IT TEND TO REMAIN UNSPOKEN MAY INDICATE THAT THESE SYMBOLIC NOTIONS ARE PARTICULARLY POWERFUL IN DETERMINING ITS VALUE.



# 1

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## Food = Meat

### MEAT IS A CURIOUS THING...

In Uganda, plantain that would feed a family for four days is said to exchange for one “scrawny” chicken with less than a twentieth of the nutritional value (Bennet, 1954: 32). The Sharanahua people of Peru see hunting for meat as men’s primary occupation, yet even the most active of them hunt for only a few hours on fewer than half the available days (Siskind, 1973: 93). Among the Canela of Amazonia, *ii mo plam* means “I am hungry”, whilst *iiyate* translates as “I am hungry for meat” (Gross, 1975: 532). The !Kung of the Kalahari describe gathered foods as “things comparable to nothing”, while meat provided by men is a synonym for food (Lee, 1972; Shostak, 1983). I suggest there may be common aspects to meat’s special status in each case.

Chagnon begins his description of the diet of the Yanomamo — the “Fierce People” — of Amazonia by noting that “The jungle provides numerous varieties of food, both animal and vegetable. The most commonly taken includes several species of monkeys, two varieties of wild ‘turkey’, two species of wild pig.....”. He then reveals that “Game animals are not abundant, and an area is rapidly hunted out” (Chagnon, 1977: 29, 33). In fact, Chagnon says, the Yanomamo spend almost as much time hunting as gardening, although cultivated foods provide 85 percent or more of their diet. I submit that an explanation of the Yanomamo’s willingness to spend a disproportionate amount of time obtaining meat, and of the fact that Chagnon himself devotes the bulk of his attention to a food that constitutes less than 15 percent of his subjects’ diet, may be subtly but inextricably interrelated.

Marco Polo noted that in China the flesh of the bigger animals was eaten by the rich and the upper classes, whilst "the others, the lower orders, do not scruple to eat all sorts of unclean flesh" (Polo, 1958: 215). I suggest that the high value of meat in so many different societies, the relative values of cuts and of species (including the perception of some as "unclean") and the widespread use of animals as a measure of value — even as currency — have related explanations.

It has been suggested that the wish of the German government, during the Second World War, to supply its forces with "excessive" standards of protein intake "led necessarily to a distortion of agriculture towards animal production, and hence to a lower total food production and the country's inability to withstand the Allied blockade. In the United Kingdom, by contrast, the philosophy of the minimal diet appealed more, and food supplies were preserved by a switch towards cereal production" (Rivers, 1981: 20). I believe that whether or not Germany was indeed weakened, its leaders' desire to supply large amounts of meat (or "protein"), and speculation on the matter by today's commentators, have explanations that are associated.

Within most nations today, industrially developed and less developed, the higher the income bracket, the greater the proportion of animal products in the diet. In one study of over 50 countries, higher-income groups consistently derived far more of their fats, proteins and calories from animal sources than did lower-income groups (Perisse *et al*, 1969). I argue that this is only to be expected, in the context of the prevailing international ideology which underpins the status of meat.

The American anthropologist Marvin Harris maintains that human beings are genetically programmed to prefer animal foods, and that this sufficiently explains preferences (Harris, 1986: 31). I hold that "instinct" is more likely to be a useful *topic*, than a useful *tool*, for analysis. It is the fact that Harris argues this case with conviction that is significant, since science does not otherwise support his view. Both biological and anthropological evidence suggest that "humans are food generalists... As a direct consequence of this, the recognition of foods cannot be pre-specified genetically" — that a food habit is rather "a feature of society and is integrated into a structure of social values that may have nothing to do with the principles of nutrition" (Rozin, 1976: 286; Le Gros Clark, 1968: 69). Like Harris, however, many people seem to believe in "instinct". Indeed, to be deprived of meat can be equated with starvation. A middle aged meat-eating woman, when asked how she might feel if she found herself in a situation where she had to kill animals for their meat herself, responds:



*I don't think I could. I think I'd probably starve. No, I'm not that adventurous.*

A standard nutritional textbook is of interest for what is implicit as much as for what it makes explicit. It opens with a historical review which begins: "In ancient times man was entirely dependent on the food around him. He was continually on the move, living in tribes, getting his food by fishing or hunting for wild animals and foraging for edible plants and fruits and berries" (Matthews & Wells, 1982: i). Although seemingly trivial, the mention of "man's" obtaining animal foods before (woman's?) foraging activity (although the latter may well have provided the bulk of the diet as in most modern subsistence societies) is significant for the very normality of the priorities implied. The textbook continues in similar vein, beginning its description of the theory of nutrition with the "proteins we need", which firstly "come mainly from meat, fish, cheese, milk and eggs" (1982: 1). Nutrition in "Under-privileged Countries" is discussed as a final chapter — which blames ignorance and "taboos" for preventing the "best use" from being made of available food — especially for pregnant women who "have the highest protein requirements of the community and need all the animal protein foods to meet their increased needs" (1982: 232). The book advocates "better education" by Western agencies. There is little or no recognition that our own high valuation of "protein", and deprivation in the "Hungry Nations", might in fact be causally linked.

The primacy of animal protein has been an established tenet of nutritional wisdom for many years, amongst much of the public as well as amongst experts. In one recent study of food distribution within British families, when asked what the family needs to eat properly:

meat was mentioned by the women more frequently than any other food. In fact, only five women [out of 200] thought meat was not an important item of the family diet. Meat, or fish as its substitute, was usually viewed as an essential ingredient of the main meal of the day and a proper meal was most commonly defined as meat and two veg. ...men's preference for meat ensured its regular consumption in most families, and when inflation or lowered income had an impact on family eating it was the reduction in the quantity and quality of meat which was most frequently reported and most regretted. The pivotal place of meat in the diet is further emphasised by its use as a synonym for food in many proverbs and aphorisms (Kerr & Charles, 1986: 140).

There may be little immediately apparent connection between this analysis and the observation, for example, that at the funeral ceremonies of the Toraja people of Indonesia the exchange and division of meat makes important statements about status concerns and themes of honour (Wellenkamp, 1984), but it is important to recognise that time and again, in different contexts, cultures, social groups, and periods of history, meat



has been an important symbol. When meat-eating is the cultural norm, it can be important even when not eaten, as one informant relates of a year amongst vegetarians:

*Well, on a subliminal level, I think, you just have this notion that it's going to be more filling; it's going to be nicer; you're going to have a better feeling of..... you're not going to want, sort of, six cream cakes after it. There's really no doubt about it, that while we were eating vegetarian food we were always hungry. I mean, we always were... The fact was, that without some meat at all — I mean even if it was once every other day, even if it was a glimmer of meat — that without any meat at any time we always had a slight hunger.*

This sort of “meat hunger” is widely expressed in a variety of ways. Meat is, to many, almost synonymous with “real” food. To the habitual meat eater, such as a male marketing executive being proposed a vegetarian alternative by his wife, it can be difficult to imagine its absence: only meat has the right substance; only meat is proper food:

*No, I mean, you can't, sort of..... chew that. What do you chew on? What do you eat?*

Meat is not only preferred food. Like bread, which enjoys a similar, though humbler, symbolic rôle, it is often synonymous with food. This idea emerges in academic writings as well as in casual conversation: Lévi-Strauss, for example, is known for his work on structural aspects of food systems, the evidence for which he derives from cultures' practices and mythologies. In a series of publications (eg. Lévi-Strauss 1963, 1966, 1970, 1973, 1978a, 1987) he develops an analysis that purports to demonstrate, amongst other things, how fire universally transforms food from a natural state to a cultural state, demarcating, he argues, the emergence of humanity. By the time of his later work, the scheme has become highly complex, including a variety of cooking operations whereby he maintains food is alternatively naturally or culturally transformed, summed up in his celebrated “culinary triangle” (1966). In the context of this study, Lévi-Strauss's work is significant for one point made, and one point missed.

The interesting point he makes is the importance of cooking as a human universal, on a par with language, denoting the separateness of human civilisation from the rest of the natural world. The point missed is that Lévi-Strauss largely fails to acknowledge that in most cases he is not discussing the cooking of *food*, but particularly the cooking of *animals*. When he argues, for example, that smoking is a “natural” means of transforming food to “cultural” ends, he surely does not mean the smoking of parsnips or plantains, but of meat. Likewise, if roasting has the special status he maintains, it is the roasting of meat. Only in his most complex elaborations does he distinguish animal from vegetable, by which time the point is well lost (Leach, 1967). It seems that to Lévi-Strauss too, the idea of food and the idea of meat are ultimately indistinguishable.



Lévi-Strauss is not alone in this. Seeger, for example, writing of the Suyá people of Central Brazil, explains that their strongest expression for an odour — *ku-kumeni* — that might be translated as “gamy”, is used to talk about sexual excretions and slightly tainted, but not rotten, food (1981: 93). He clearly means tainted meat. Edmund Leach too, in his analysis of “Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse” (1964) persistently talks about “food values” and “food names”, whilst his discussion revolves around animals and flesh foods to a degree utterly disproportionate to their role in the diet, measured by monetary value, nutritional value, or bulk. His equation of “food” with “meat” merely reflects the pre-eminence that meat has in our diet and in our thought. As Julia Twigg notes:

Meat is the most highly prized of food. It is the centre around which a meal is arranged. It stands in a sense for the very idea of food itself... our meat and drink. At the top of the hierarchy, then, we find meat, and in particular red meat, for the status and meaning of meat is quintessentially found in red meat. Lower in status are the ‘bloodless’ meats — chicken and fish — and below these are the animal products — eggs and cheese. These are sufficiently high in the hierarchy to support a meal’s being formed around them, though they are confined to the low status events — the omelette and cheese flan of light lunch or supper. Below these we have the vegetables, regarded in the dominant scheme as insufficient for the formation of a meal, and merely ancillary (Twigg, 1983: 21-22).

Meat regularly takes the starring role. Caricatured though “meat and two veg” may be, the inevitable reply to “What’s for dinner?”, will be “Pork”, or “Chicken”, or “Beef”, or whatever the meat component of the meal in question may be. Likewise, when food arrives at table, it is unlikely to be the brussels sprouts which receive first comment, as one informant realised:

*... a lot of the things I enjoyed had nothing to do with meat. So I suddenly realised that, you know, most people always make this big thing about a meal, that it’s the meat that’s always most praised when someone cooks a meal, and that’s the important bit. And I enjoyed the other bits so much....*

Another informant mentions a seemingly insignificant minor personal routine for which she has no explanation:

*I know it doesn’t make much sense but I always have to put the meat on the plate first, before the vegetables. I really don’t know why... it just seems right that way — meat first, vegetables next. I keep wondering why it is I do it but... it just wouldn’t be right otherwise.*

The arrival of a “roast” at table can be a scene of considerable ceremony. It is the one occasion in the traditional British household where the male head of household may be expected to help serve, as he may have helped with its purchase. The meat’s arrival is



properly greeted by conspicuous inhalations and references to its aroma, and the first mouthful should be followed by appropriate remarks on its flavour and tenderness. But whilst a roast of meat is still the epitome of the proper meal, it is the idea of any meat, the feeling of meat, the spirit of meat, that is essential:

*I do have meat with most meals I suppose. We might just have an omelette now and again, but usually there's at least a bit of meat there, like in a spaghetti bolognese or something. I mean, even if there's lots of vegetables and things there, it wouldn't taste the same without that bit of mince.*

The range of soya-based meat-analogues and other substitutes available today indeed testifies to the centrality of *concept* of meat, not to its dispensability. It seems likely that even if a perfect substitute for meat were developed, indistinguishable in any respect from the real thing, many meat-eaters would be reluctant to swap. There is just something important about its having come from an animal. As the technical director of a company producing soya protein remarks, explaining the fact that more of his product is fed to pets than to humans, "You do not have to educate dogs, except by giving them the stuff" (*The Times*, 24 Nov. 1978). Similarly, many people wishing to shun meat feel that the gap left in their habitual food system needs to be filled with a direct equivalent which mimics the form or the nutritional content of meat itself. At the launch of *Quorn*, a new "high protein, fibrous substance brewed entirely from a microscopic plant", Saffron Davies asks:

who will buy it? Vegetarians are an obvious target if they want to eat "meat" that is not meat. It can be made to look more or less like herbivorous flesh, it chews like meat and it has a similar texture. It is in many ways superior to the protein extracted from soya, which has considerably coarser fibres than meat and so is more chewy ("Meal on a String", *Guardian*, 12 July 1988).

Unfortunately, however, few meat substitutes are entirely satisfactory. Discussing the launch of Tivall, a new soya-based contender in the field, Colin Spencer rues that:

making the bean palatable has been a major problem. Technology has made it possible to isolate the protein in the bean for use as Textured Vegetable Protein (TVP) or to mix with cereals in meat substitutes. But TVP is like trying to digest a minced trampoline, and all of the meat substitutes made in the United Kingdom have tasted so dire to me that I would prefer to go hungry. These products, trying to ape the British sausage, add too much cereal with its carbohydrate content while allowing a pronounced aftertaste to linger on the palate like a fermenting sock (*Guardian*, 12 March 1988).

Even when the form of meat is entirely foregone, a substitute product is normally nominated which is almost always of animal origin, possibly due to a lingering belief in the need for large amounts of protein in a healthy diet:



*I think another thing that's changed our eating habits towards meat [was] when I started getting migraines from cheese, because we used to eat a lot of cheese. You know, we'd have macaroni cheese and things like that. Cheese could be your meat substitute.*

Meat is pre-eminent in our food system and, even allowing for the fact that the majority of ethnographies are written by Western anthropologists with Western interests, it is clear that this is also so in the food systems of many other cultures. But this is not only for its positive valuation. Around the world, meat is also by far the most common focus for food avoidance, taboos, and special regulation (Simoons, 1967). In Western society too, feelings of disgust about foods almost always relate to meat or other animal products (Angyal, 1941). In Macbeth, for example, almost every component of the infamous witches' brew is of animal origin (IV. 1):

#### FIRST WITCH

Round about the cauldron go;  
In the poisoned entrails throw:  
Toad that under cold stone  
Days and nights has thirty-one.  
Sweltered venom, sleeping got,  
Boil thou first i'the charmed pot.

ALL

Double, double, toil and trouble;  
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.

#### SECOND WITCH

Fillet of a fenny snake  
In the cauldron boil and bake;  
Eye of newt, and toe of frog,  
Wool of bat, and tongue of dog,  
Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting,  
Lizard's leg and howlet's wing,  
For a charm of powerful trouble,  
Like a hell-broth, boil and bubble.

ALL

Double, double, toil and trouble;  
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.

#### THIRD WITCH

Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf,  
Witch's mummy, maw and gulf  
Of the ravined salt sea shark,  
Root of hemlock digged i'the dark,  
Liver of blaspheming Jew,  
Gall of goat, and slips of yew  
Slivered in the moon's eclipse,  
Nose of Turk, and Tartar's lips,  
Finger of birth-strangled babe,  
Ditch-delivered by a drab,  
Make the gruel thick and slab.  
Add thereto a tiger's chaudron  
For the ingredience of our cauldron.

ALL

Double, double, toil and trouble;  
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.

**SECOND WITCH**

Cool it with a baboon's blood;  
Then the charm is firm and good.

The foods which are likely to nauseate us are the most recognisably animal, such as the gristle, the blood vessels, increasingly today the internal organs, and above all the eyes. This is less commonly the case with vegetable foods. And, much as we may revere red meats as the best of all foods, it is interesting to note that we almost invariably subject it to cooking and other processing so that by the time it reaches our plate to actually enter our mouths it is seldom red — the colour of blood — at all, but grey, brown, or it may even be quite unidentifiable, lost amongst its various accompaniments.

I aim to suggest possible reasons why meat should have come to enjoy such a peculiar position in our appraisal of potential nutriment, both in positive terms as the most privileged of foods, and also in negative terms as the most feared and abhorred of foods.



# 2

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## A Brief History of Meat Eating

THE SECOND MAIN THEME of this work concerns recent changes in British meat eating patterns. The most striking developments have been an increase in numbers of those avoiding meat, a rise in the popularity of reputedly healthier white meats relative to red meats, and the appearance of a small-but-growing market for meat from free-range or organically reared animals.

Before considering these trends in detail, it may be useful to put things in context by taking a brief look at the history of meat eating in Britain. Sources of reference for before about the turn of this century are far from complete and not always reliable. Regular collection of agricultural statistics only began in Ireland in 1847 and in Great Britain in 1867, and no official attempts were made to measure UK meat output until the first census of production in 1907, so figures prior to these dates must be treated with caution (Perren, 1978: 2). But from a variety of other sources it is possible to build up a fair picture of meat eating over the years.

IT IS WIDELY BELIEVED that it was only with the advent of hunting as an important activity, variously estimated at between two and four million years ago, that humans began to eat much meat (Ucko & Dimbleby, 1969: 526). Although this belief will be shown in Chapter 5 to be based on modern supposition as much as on the available evidence, we do know from archaeological excavations that people have eaten at least some meat for as long as they have inhabited the British Isles. Rings of mutton-bones found around great

fire-pits belonging to the large Celtic Belgae tribe in what is now Kent, for example, are interpreted to imply members throwing away gnawed bones over their shoulders (Pullar, 1970: 45). Jane Renfrew writes that "The first men appear to have arrived in Britain sometime before 300,000 years ago. These men were hunters" (Renfrew, 1985a: 6). But she goes on to admit that our view of this period is largely speculative: "From the camp sites so far excavated, there has been little evidence for the plant food part of their diet, but on analogy with modern hunting communities up to 80% of their diet may have consisted of vegetable sources (1985a: 6). Such evidence cannot in any case tell us precisely *how much* meat was eaten, nor *how regularly* it was consumed. The evidence from the archaeology of early Christian Ireland, however, suggests that livestock husbandry was primarily based upon dairy farming rather than meat production (McCormick, 1987).

Little certain is known of habits prior to the time of the Norman invasion, and what information exists largely relates to the ruling élites of their period. Surveying eating habits in Roman times, for example, Renfrew writes that:

Perhaps the best introduction to Roman cooking is to look at the description of some of the most elaborate banquets recorded — bearing in mind that they are exceptions rather than the rule, they give one a vivid insight into the extravagant aspirations and achievements of the Roman cooks (Renfrew, 1985b: 11).

She continues to catalogue such dishes as dormice seasoned with poppy seeds and honey; "eggs" made from spiced garden warblers in pastry; beef kidneys and testicles; the uterus of a sow; chickens; hare; wild boar containing live thrushes; pigs, slaughtered on the spot, stuffed with black pudding and sausages — all at a single meal. This indeed tells us something about the excesses of a ruling class, but says little about what most people actually ate during the period. Indeed, it is not for another dozen pages that Renfrew informs us that "the Romans were enthusiastic about vegetables", and provides an inventory of their delights in a paragraph of seven lines (1985b: 23). This highlights both the paucity of reliable data on the normal diet of such periods, and the bias of most modern writers towards the colourful lives of a minority.

From what evidence exists, it can be gleaned that up until the last few centuries animal products were for most people probably less pre-eminent than they are today. According to the Reverend Oswald Cockayne's studies of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, cookery was a much admired art (Cockayne, n.d.). His work shows, however, that animal dishes were just one part of the cook's repertoire; goose-giblets, pigs-trotters and pigeon in a piquant sauce were lauded, but equally were peas with honey, and nettles cooked in water. Patricia Pullar, in her history of English food, holds that when much is made of the



"poverty" of diet in the period, the fact that cattle were not then reared primarily for meat is not usually taken sufficiently into account. Oxen, she says, "were draught animals, cows were for milk; sheep were for wool and dairy produce. The diet was largely one of dairy produce, legumes, cereals, game, fish, wild fowl and *young animals*" (Pullar, 1970: 74).<sup>1</sup>

Meat was certainly already a prestige food however, as shown by its proscription during Christian periods of fasting such as Lent. Particularly until the eighth or ninth centuries (when Ash Wednesday was first nominated the official beginning of fasting) this could mean as many as fifty or sixty successive days without meat, and rules of abstinence at their peak embraced half of all the days in the year (Pullar, 1970: 75; Kisbán, 1986: 3). However, other foods including bread were equally luxurious to most European people until perhaps the fourteenth century when agricultural methods improved cultivation of bread grains (Kisbán, 1986: 3).

Throughout the Middle Ages, the greatest differences in eating patterns were not so much between geographical areas as between the mass of the population and a numerically small but outstandingly wealthy élite, whose diet was marked by conspicuous consumption in terms of quality, quantity and variety (Kisbán, 1986: 4). As Norbert Elias notes of the period:

The relation to meat-eating moves in the medieval world between the following poles. On the one hand, in the secular upper class the consumption of meat is extraordinarily high, compared to the standard of our own times. A tendency prevails to devour quantities of meat that to us seem fantastic. On the other hand, in the monasteries an ascetic abstention from all meat-eating largely prevails, and abstention resulting from self-denial, not from shortage, and often accompanied by a radical depreciation or restriction of eating. From these circles come expressions of strong aversion to the 'gluttony' among the upper-class laymen.

The meat consumption of the lowest class, the peasants, is also frequently extremely limited — not from a spiritual need, a voluntary renunciation with regard to God and the next world, but from shortage. Cattle are expensive and therefore destined, for a long period, essentially for the rulers' tables (Elias, 1978 [1939]: 118).

It is the habits of the élite however which are better documented, and which tend therefore to characterise the period. Thus when we hear that medieval Europeans were exceptionally carnivorous by comparison with the vegetable-eating peoples of the East

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<sup>1</sup> This does not inhibit Pullar herself from illustrating this section on their cookery solely with reference to meat dishes..."Meat broths and stews containing pot-herbs were concocted in giant cauldrons; meat was also fried, steamed or roasted and brought to the table on long spits..." (1970: 74).



(Braudel, 1974: 248-9), the comparison is with the wealthy and powerful in society. Of them the popular image is at least partly true, with occasional lavish and ostentatious feasting. Otherwise meat was in fairly short supply, except immediately after the Black Death, when a smaller population had more and better land and stock to share.

One stimulus to consumption in the late Middle Ages may have been increasing use of draught horses, gradually releasing oxen for human food (Thirsk, 1978). By the eighteenth century, England had more domestic beasts per acre and per person than any country in Europe except the Netherlands (O'Brien, 1977: 169), and had already gained a reputation for meat consumption. M. Misson a foreign visitor to England in the 1790s, reported (presumably referring to the upper classes):

I have always heard that they [the English] were great flesh-eaters, and I found it true. I have known people in England that never eat any bread, and universally they eat very little. They nibble a few crumbs, while they chew meat by whole mouthfuls (quoted in Stead, 1985: 20).

One cause of increasing meat consumption in the eighteenth century was a series of agricultural innovations. New feeding practices and the enclosure of land removed the need for the slaughter of animals for salting prior to the onset of winter. Meanwhile, the import of new breeds from Holland markedly raised livestock rearing standards. For many people meat from farm animals began to replace game meat for the first time, particularly as hunting laws became more restrictive for non-landowners. High meat consumption became general amongst more than just a powerful minority. "Butchers meat was cheap" although it was still the case that "if one compares the prices with wages it may be seen that working men could not afford to eat well" (Stead, 1985: 23).

Technical innovations directly facilitated the general increase in average meat consumption evident from the eighteenth century onwards, but it is important to note that this was a period during which human society's perception of, and thus relationship with, the world that it inhabited was undergoing substantial change. Rapidly developing scientific orthodoxy and expanding industrial potency were combining to change the very way in which people viewed their surroundings as, to an unprecedented extent, society came to extol the virtues of environmental conquest. In the words of Eszter Kisbán, this period of history:

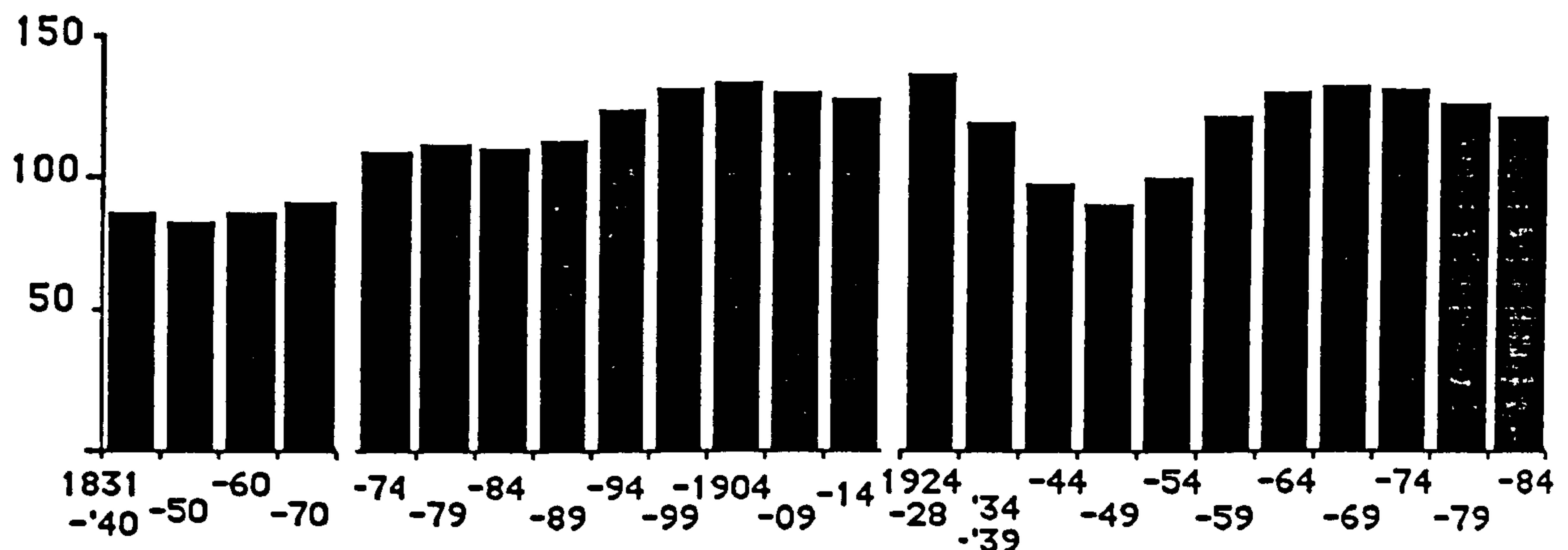
embraces the emergence of modern natural sciences, technical innovations, industrialisation, urbanisation. Though they appeared at different periods in different places, they nevertheless provide the characteristic features...

It is no accident that in parallel with these great economic and social changes there was a continuous increase in meat consumption (Kisbán, 1986: 8).



British meat consumption continued to increase from the mid-to-late eighteenth century onwards, particularly between 1874 and 1896 when it jumped from 110lb to 130lb per person per year. By 1881 more money was spent on meat than on bread (Burnett, 1966: 29, 130, 131):

**Fig 1. Av. Consumption of meat per head per annum in UK, 1831-1984 (lbs).**



(Sources: Perren, 1978: 3; Frank, 1987).

Reay Tannahill sees the growth in consumption as partly supply-driven, since the last decades of the nineteenth century, "the heyday of imperialism, were years of land-grabbing and utilization on a majestic scale (Tannahill, 1988: 316). Perren suggests a general rise in real incomes, a liberalisation in tariff policy encouraging imports, and advances in transportation and refrigeration technology to have been complementary factors encouraging the market for meat (1979: 216). For example, when the SS. Strathleven brought the first really successful cargo of frozen beef and mutton from Melbourne to London in 1880, the meat which had sold for a penny ha'penny in Australia now fetched fivepence ha'penny at Smithfield (Burnett, 1966: 134).

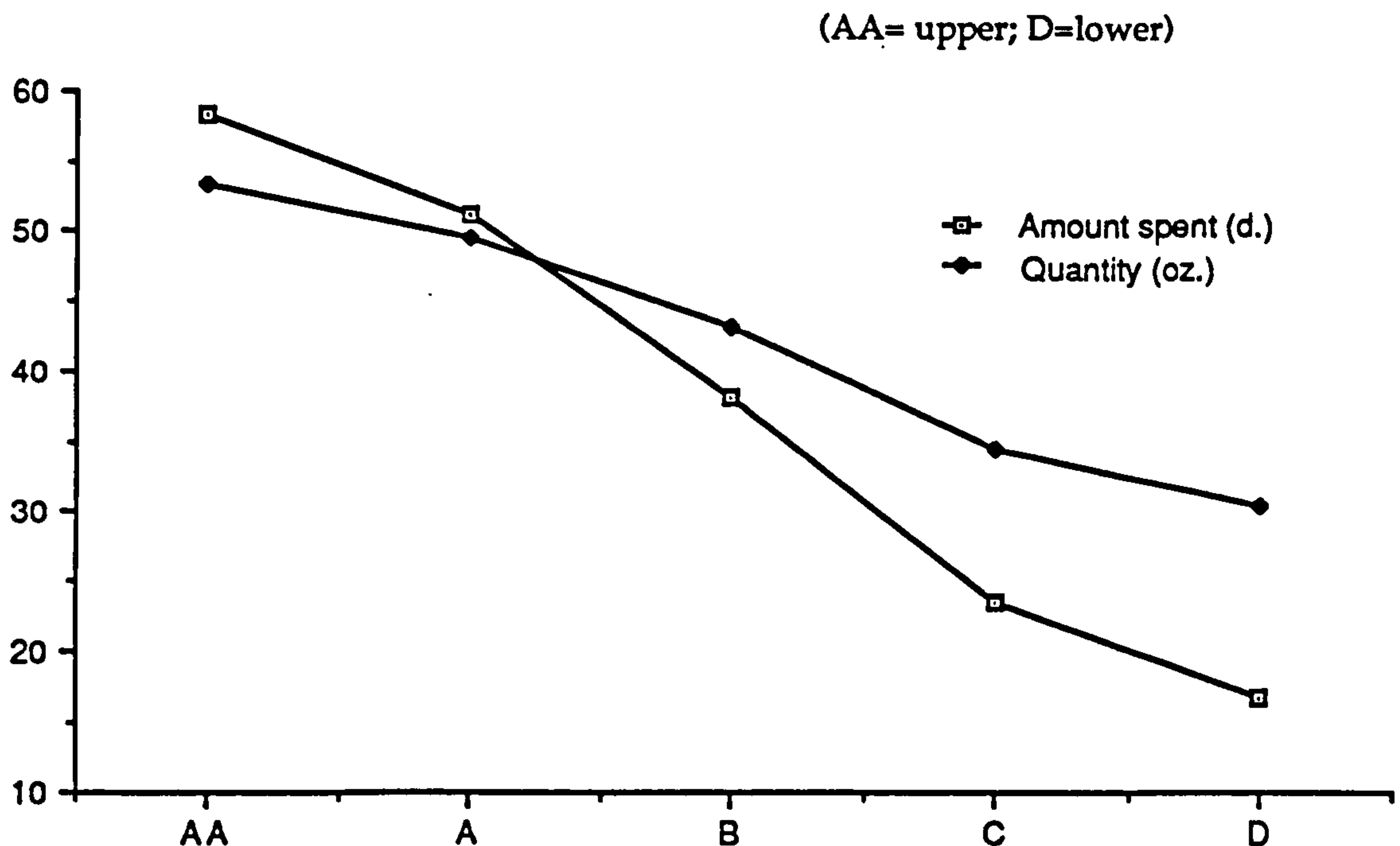
Average consumption figures for this period however disguise enormous variations, as the benefits of the industrial revolution were unevenly spread. The diet of the numerically large working classes in the mid-to-late eighteenth century was as bad as it had been at any time in the century, and most labourers rarely saw meat at all. A morsel of bacon was luxury and a farmer might compel his workers to take diseased and unsaleable meat in lieu of wages (Burnett, 1966: 129, 156-7). According to Edward Smith's 1863 inquiry into the food of the poor, whilst labourers' diet was on the whole adequate, their wives

and children were often badly fed, most food going to the breadwinner (Smith, 1863). This suggests that meat consumption by the affluent at that time must have been particularly high. Around the turn of the twentieth century, however, the fashionable meal began to become lighter and more varied:

the excessive meat-eating of earlier generations was gradually being replaced by dishes of a more vegetarian nature, partly, at least, as a result of the new knowledge of nutrition which emphasised the dietary importance of fresh fruit and vegetables. London had at least two vegetarian restaurants at the turn of the century, and it is noticeable that the later editions of standard cookery books devoted increasing space to the preparation and service of vegetable dishes (Burnett, 1966: 228).

Prior to the second world war, total per capita consumption had not changed dramatically, but considerable variation in both quantity and quality of meat purchases still existed between social groups. According to Sir William Crawford's survey of 1937, weekly purchases were as follows:

**Fig 2. Weekly consumption of meat by social class in 1837.**



(Source: Burnett, 1966: 317-8).

In terms of per capita consumption, meat supplies were at their lowest not during the war, but whilst rationing continued afterwards, particularly in 1948, 1949 and 1951 (Frank, 1987). Consumption rose sharply with de-rationing. This rise levelled out in about 1958, and continued only slowly until 1971. From 1972-1976 consumption began to decline,



although it recovered in the years between 1976 and 1979 largely due to EEC policies aimed at reducing the beef "mountain". Since then, however, the slow decline has continued (Frank, 1987).

Today, UK agriculture is still a major industry, contributing around 2% of the national Gross Domestic Product, of which the meat sector accounts for about 40% and dairying another 30%. It employs about 3% of the workforce, the livelihoods of about 400,000 people being dependent on livestock farming. Nonetheless, the United Kingdom is still at the bottom of the European meat consumption league at about 72kg/person/year whilst France, for example, consumes over 100kg/person/year (Sloyan, 1985: 3-4). The complexity of the statistics involved makes a clear picture of recent trends difficult to establish, as the following article demonstrates:

The myth that we are eating less meat in pursuit of a healthier lifestyle was exposed yesterday.

Though many people switched to bean sprouts and lentil burgers at home, they have been led astray by more frequent forays to fast food fried chicken and burger bars.

Meat consumption in the United Kingdom is higher now than at any time during the past 20 years, according to a report by Mintel, the market research group, which is supported by figures from the Meat & Livestock Commission.

The growth in meat consumption is not large, but it casts doubt on polls which consistently indicate that people are eating less meat than they used to.

Total meat consumption (including poultry) reached four million tonnes in 1987. In no other year since 1968 has consumption exceeded 3.9 million tonnes, and it has usually been a bit less.

"Affluent southerners concerned about their health may think they are eating less meat, but the facts just don't bear this out," said Mr Mick Sloyan, a principal economist with the commission. He agrees that the picture is confused by conflicting changes in habit.

First, poultry consumption has nearly doubled since 1968 to a million tonnes. By contrast red meat has slumped below three million tonnes and continues to decline.

The slide has been sharpest in fresh red meat bought from the butcher's slab and supermarket counter.

"It is this swing away from buying raw red meat for home cooking which has allowed so many people to convince themselves that they are eating less meat," Mr Sloyan added.

The third factor is an increase in the number of vegetarians, with estimates ranging between 3 and 6 per cent of the population...

Increased affluence also means that fewer people are cooking a Sunday joint as a sign of social status.

But affluence has also brought a vast and largely-uncharted increase in fast-food consumption. The Ministry of Agriculture ignores food consumed outside the home when it does its diet studies.

A book, *Fast Food Facts*, to be published this month by the London Food Commission, says Britons are eating 20 million fast food meals a week.

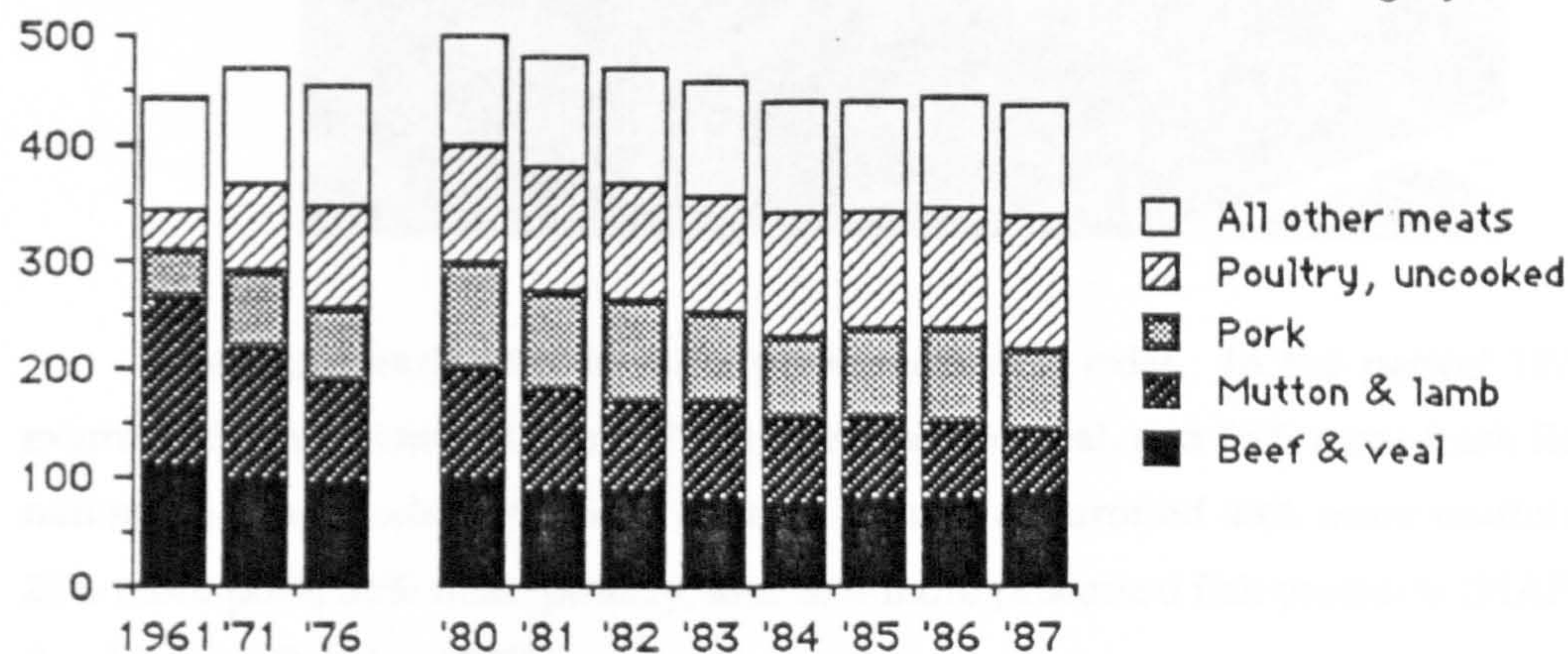
The big three outlets, McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Wimpy, are alone selling £500 million worth of fast food each year. This, said Mr Sloyan,



is the hidden menu which has kept meat sales buoyant. (James Erlichman, "Fast food fad belies the meatless myth", *The Guardian*, 7 Oct 1988).

It should be noted that the rise in consumption claimed is for the total amount of meat sold, and does not therefore necessarily indicate a rising trend since it is not related to demographic change. Otherwise, however, the general pattern indicated seems fair. In the two decades, 1966-1986, per capita sales of meat and meat products in Britain fell only marginally, from 37.99 oz/person/week to 37.07 oz/p/w, but within that market occurred significant sub-trends. Beef and veal consumption fell from 8.13 oz/p/w to 6.58 oz/p/w, mostly in the 1980s, and mutton and lamb fell from 6.28 oz/p/w to 3.01 oz/p/w. Pork consumption rose from 2.76 oz/p/w to 3.64 oz/p/w, matched by a fall in uncooked bacon & ham eating from 5.30 oz/p/w to 3.68 oz/p/w. The major rises in consumption were for poultry and cooked chicken, from 4.06 oz/p/w to 7.30 oz/p/w, and for "other meat products", from 2.78 oz/p/w to 5.67 oz/p/w (HMSO Ann. Abst. of Stats.).

Fig 3. Indices of Meat Consumption in the home, 1961-1987.  
(1980=100 for each category)



(Source: HMSO Social Trends 19, 1989).

1980 to 1985 in particular saw beef and veal consumption in the home fall by 20%, mutton and lamb by 27%, and pork by 17%. These falls were balanced by a rise, beginning in the 1960s, in meat eaten away from home, especially in fast food establishments (Sloyan, 1985: 4). A significant shift has also occurred in meat shopping patterns: between 1979 and 1989 independent butchers' share of the market for meat fell from 56.% to 39% overall, while that sold in supermarkets rose from 20% to 38% (*Butcher and Processor*, Apr. 1989: 5). There has also been a rise in demand for meat perceived as healthier, such as lower fat products and more white meats, as well as for free-range and organic meat, which now constitutes a small specialised market. Altogether about six times as much poultry was eaten in 1984 as in 1954 (Frank, 1987), and in July 1987 the British Chicken Information



Service announced that "Chicken is now Britain's most popular meat — beating beef into second place for the first time" (*Meat Trades Journal*, 20 July 1989: 15).

1: Independent butchers' share of the market has fallen



Regional variations in meat preferences also exist. In the period 1975-1980, for example, Scots consumed about 40% more beef and veal, and 65% more fresh fish, than the national average, whilst those in Greater London ate around 43% more mutton and lamb, 28% more pork, 32% more poultry, and 56% more processed fish products (MAFF, National Food Survey Results, 1982).

Numbers of vegetarians have also been rising. Although vegetarianism did exist in mediaeval times, and even in the classical world, not to mention in India and other cultures, in its modern incarnation (characterised by a system of associated ideas to do with health, animal welfare, spirituality, and other social and environmental concerns) the phenomenon began to emerge slowly from the late eighteenth century onwards. It grew steadily in the nineteenth century, notably marked by the founding of the Vegetarian Society in 1847, and has continued at varying rates ever since (Twigg, 1983: 20).

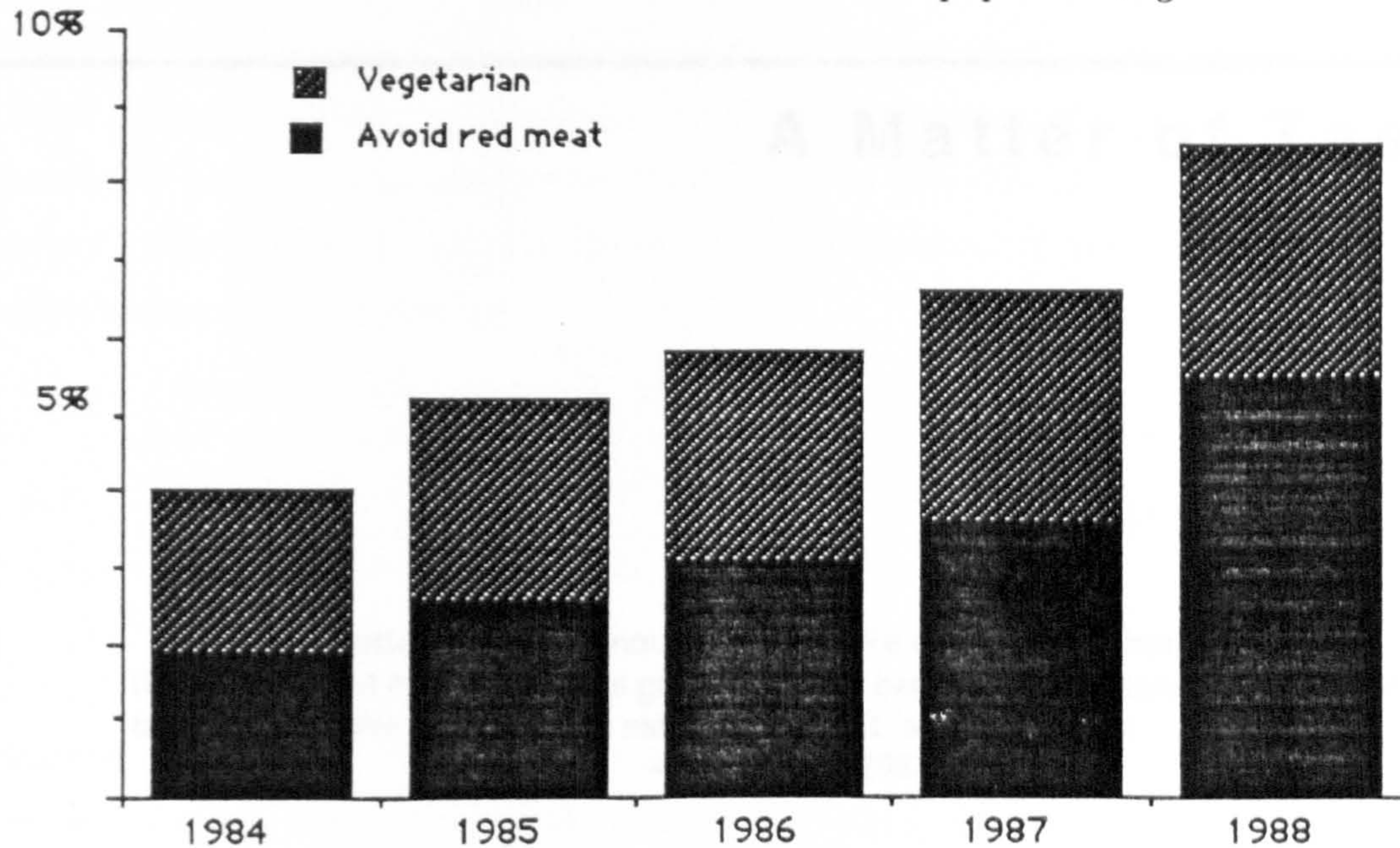
In Britain, during the second world war, 120,000 applicants for food rationing cards registered as vegetarians — about 0.25% of the population — and most were middle-aged and elderly (Erhard, 1973: 5). In the mid-1980s around two percent of the adult population did not eat any meat at all, with a further 2% avoiding red meat (Harrington, 1985: 5;



Realeat Co. Press Release 27 Sept 1986). By 1988 this had risen to 3% vegetarian (1.3m) and 5.5% avoiding red meat (2.4m) — a combined total of 3.7 million adults, or about 4.9 million people. This is an increase of 29% over 1987 and 113% over 1984.

**Fig 4. Non-meat eaters. Makeup and change 1984-1988.**

(% of GB population, age 16+)



(Source: Gallup Survey conducted for The Realeat Company, 1988).

Meat avoidance is more common among women than men, and particularly among unmarried women. On the most recent evidence, 17% of single women avoid red meat or all meat. Geographical variations also exist, with over 44% of Scots claiming to be reducing their meat intake, as against 21.5% in Wales, and 35.3% in London (Realeat Co. Press Release Dec 1988). It is also more common for those from the better-off social groups to avoid meat, with over 10% of AB groups doing so, compared with 7.7% of C1s; with 8% of C2s, and 8.6% for DE group members, the proportion of the population not eating meat rises again in lower income groups. This points to one of the most significant aspects of this rapid recent growth in numbers of people avoiding meat: namely that today non-meat eating is largely a matter of choice, and is most prevalent among better off and better informed members of the population, rather than by necessity.



# 3

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## A Matter of Taste

Food has little to do with nourishment. We do not eat what we eat because it is convenient or because it is good for us or because it is practical or because it tastes good. We eat what we eat because that is what we eat

— WELSCH, 1981: 369

THE WORD TASTE IS AMBIGUOUS. We use it both to refer to the objective flavour of an item, and to whether we enjoy our sensory reaction to its stimulus. We habitually discuss our food preferences as if the pleasure or displeasure were inherent in the material, rather than our learned response to flavours. We might believe, for example, that we like meat because it has a rich flavour, or because it is somehow uniquely satisfying.

Before taking this discussion of meat further, however, the notion that we enjoy eating animal flesh simply for its physical qualities must be disposed of. Just as beauty is said to be in the eye of the beholder, so flavour is largely in the tastebud of the consumer. In this chapter I wish to suggest that our attitudes to different foods are largely conditioned by the associations which we invest in them, and that habit, tradition, and convenience mainly reflect the continuity of these meanings over a longer period. Some foods' associations may be essentially arbitrary, but others — including meat's — are discernibly significant, suggesting that changing tastes in food might imply wider cultural change. Mary Douglas notes that:

Nutritionists know that the palate is trained, that taste and smell are subject to cultural control. Yet for lack of other hypotheses, the notion persists

that what makes an item of food acceptable is some quality inherent in the thing itself. Present research into palatability tends to concentrate on individual reactions to individual items. It seeks to screen out cultural effects as so much interference. Whereas... the cultural controls on perception are precisely what needs to be analysed (Douglas, 1978: 59).

As if to illustrate Douglas's case, Paul Fieldhouse states that "Some foods confer high status on the eaters, others assume high status because of the groups that eat them" (1986: 77), as if the high status can be a natural component of the food itself, rather than a social attribute. To cite good taste to explain food habits is to put the "cart before the horse". George Orwell, similarly, assumes the rôle of arbiter of taste in noting that we can come to like almost anything:

[The] English palate, especially the working class palate, now rejects good food almost automatically. The number of people who *prefer* tinned peas and tinned fish to real peas and real fish must be increasing every year, and plenty of people who could afford to have real milk in their tea much sooner have tinned milk (Orwell, 1937: 89).

That our likes and dislikes do not greatly depend upon the nature of the foods themselves is clear from the wide variations in people's preferences, both within our own society and between different cultures around the world and in history. One person's meat is indeed another's poison. For example, Patricia Pullar reports that in ancient Rome sow's wombs eaten together with sow's udders were a delicacy (1970: 10n) — a dish at which most modern Westerners would shudder. Few of us, however, often ponder the fact that our daily breakfast eggs similarly originate as part of an animal's reproductive system.

British supermarkets do not sell dog or horse; nor do we eat many sparrows or larks; nor slugs or grubs; nor marigolds, medlars, or quinces. Some disgust us, others are just not widely viewed as food, although each is consumed elsewhere or was here in the past. Tastes change and tastes vary. Even within one family, a Shetland man and his incomer wife disagree about the palatability of various traditional "delicacies" of their sheep-farming community:

*SANDY We've done skinned heads, and my father did quite a few of that.*

*JENNY But they're disgusting — not if I can help it.*

*SANDY No, and you wouldn't do puddins. Have you seen folk do puddins? Have you tasted it?*

*JENNY I've not seen them done, but I have tasted it and I didn't like the taste.*

*SANDY Yes, it's an acquired taste. But also all other different birds, and different eggs, and all different fish too, when they were all available, and crappin', and all that stuff. That's an acquired taste. Boy, is that gruesome!... It's, er, oatmeal, and fish livers: a very strong fishy taste. You can stuff a fish head with it and do it that way. It can be pretty strong... That's something to eat before going into the sea. It's a tradition that they eat it before Uphelly'a. It's*



*meant to line the stomach, and you can drink more booze on top of it. It just makes you honk all the sooner.*

Taste is not an absolute — at least amongst adults — it is something we develop whilst growing up within a culture which has its own general preferences. J.E. Steiner (1977) showed that new-born human infants are predisposed to like sweet flavours, and sweetness may be a label for useful calories; similarly, a preference for salty tastes may encourage absorption of necessary minerals. Even these predispositions can, however, be unlearned. Many, for example, grow to actively dislike sweet or salty foods, just as we can learn to enjoy foods that are fiercely hot, bitter, salt, sweet or sour — indeed practically any substance that is not excessively toxic.

We do not even taste things in the same way. A classic experiment (v. Skramlik, 1926) involved respondents sampling ammonium chloride, with its characteristic salty, sour and bitter flavour, before being asked to mix common salt, tartaric acid (sour) and quinine hydrochloride (bitter) to match its balance of flavours. Results varied widely, some individuals requiring no quinine at all, some ten times the tartaric acid as others. This suggests that, physically, we each respond differently to unfamiliar flavours, and that chemical taste does not become perceived taste until we have learned it, or in other words until we have developed an opinion of it.

Some foods do not even feed us: if we consume diet colas and non-digestible fat substitutes, for example, it is not for their nutritional qualities but because we have learned to appreciate their characteristic flavours and the values which these represent. Similarly, views vary enormously as to which plants, animals, or other items should be regarded as food, as well as to how they should be presented. Thus the flavours which we learn to most enjoy can vary greatly too, as elegantly expressed by a nineteenth century author:

Perhaps there is no such thing in persons who are grown up as a perfectly pure and natural taste. The taste may be sound and even fine, but it is always more or less influenced by custom and by association, until it breeds an Acquired taste which is not to be reasoned with and will not be denied. The Greenlander takes to tallow; the southern Frenchman glories in garlic; the East Indian is mightily in pepper. No force of reasoning can prove to them that other tastes are better; they have an Acquired taste which insists on being pampered. And precisely the same phenomenon occurs, though in a less marked way, when we get a dish which we know, which we expect, and which does not correspond to its name. A very pleasant Julienne soup can be made without sorrel; but those who look for the sorrel always feel that without it the Julienne is a failure (Dallas, 1877: 12-13).

Most adult Britons, including those of us who consider ourselves open-minded, would tend not to eat sweet custard together with beef mince, although we might enjoy each individually, and though there is little convincing argument against the dish on rational or health grounds. It simply contradicts our normal culinary patterns — our familiar taste.

IT IS THE IDEAS WE HAVE ABOUT SOMETHING, in relation to our cosmology — our view of how the world is — which govern its taste: our view of its edibility or its desirability. Custard is part of the sweet course; meat is not. Wine tastes better from a crystal goblet than from a chipped clay mug. As Jean Soler remarks of the semiotics of food in the Bible, the “explanation of food preferences and aversions must be sought not in the nature of the food items [but in a] people’s underlying thought pattern” (Soler, 1979: 129). An item’s edibility depends not upon its flavour, but upon its being found a position in our own classification of acceptable foods, as illustrated by this informant’s pub lunch:

*Just as we started to eat, Paul suddenly screwed up his face and spat something out onto his fork. He took a swig of his drink to wash away the taste, and then examined this disgusting lump on his fork — and then he laughed and put it straight back in his mouth, saying: “Oh, it’s OK. It’s a brussels sprout! I thought it was a mushroom!”*

In this example, the food tasted unpleasant because it failed to match the consumer’s expectations. In many more cases a potential foodstuff may be rejected because its associations do not adequately conform with a person’s ideology. Our reaction is to the *image* of a food. Thus wholefoods can be just as unpalatable to the habitual eater of convenience foods, as junk foods are to the lover of health foods. Taste is an acquired outlook; it is largely a matter of whether we believe we *ought* to like something:

*We’ve never ever advertised the café as a vegan café, partly because we don’t want to put people off — “a vegan café? I’m not going to like vegan food”, though once they try it I’m sure most people don’t even notice.*

The foods we select reflect our thought in many ways, including our conception of our actual or desired way of life and our perceptions of the food choices of people with whom we wish to identify. The popularity of cookbooks or foodstuffs bearing the name of media personalities with little previous reputation for culinary ability are one example of this trait. It is not just that our food choices are sometimes influenced by a particular person or group; all of our alimentary behaviour is, in one way or another. We eat nothing in



isolation, but as part of our culture — nonconformist habits and changes over time notwithstanding.

Social groups have characteristic preferences — of late, for example, lower income groups have tended to favour sweets, smooth substances, and strong flavours, whilst upper income groups prefer bitter, textured, and light substances (Barthes, 1975). The tendency to prefer foods identified with groups to which we belong, or aspire, and to reject the preferences of reputedly inferior groups, accounts for many fashions in what is popular, prestigious, or pernicious. A much-commented example is the changing images of white and brown sugar, and white and brown bread:

From medieval times, the high prestige of white bread has been well documented in both England and France: the further down the social scale, the darker the bread. The upper classes regarded black and brown breads with aversion — it was even claimed their stomachs could not digest them — while the lower orders aspired to white or whiter bread... White bread having become available to all and brown bread having thus, so to speak, fallen off the bottom of the social scale, the brown reappeared towards the top. For the fashion for wholemeal bread has begun to spread downwards from the upper reaches of the social scale since the 1950s (Mennel, 1985: 303).

We feed not only our appetite but also our desire to belong. Foods express social values, and by consuming them we acknowledge a shared set of meanings. Their rejection can therefore signal dissent — whether by infants, religious sects, or even at the Boston Tea Party.

FAMILIARITY OR TRADITION is commonly said to govern food choice. An American textbook on *Medical Anthropology*, for example, states that “Tradition is also important in determining diet. Traditional foods become symbols of ethnic identity, and diet can be highly resistant to change” (McElroy & Townsend, 1985: 195). Douglas & Nicod find in habit the basis of their work on the “structure” of meals: “a basic English system that underlies regional variations” (1974: 747). Every culture, they argue, has a unique meal structure — a frame of rules as to how to construct a “food event”, unconsciously conformed to time and again. As they observe of the orthodox family:

the housewife composing a meal, and her family sitting in gastronomic judgement upon it, are themselves conscious of the need for past models to guide them as to just what they are supposed to be serving or receiving. Parts of the meal may reflect new economies or daring experiment on her part; but usually the meal has to be recognisably a meal of a certain known kind. There may be minor changes, but everything conspires to imply that at least the frame is steady (Douglas & Nicod, 1974: 744).



But such accounts ultimately say little more than that we get into habits and prefer the familiar. This applies not only to particular foods but also to how we order them, how we accompany them, and the variety and variability of our choice. To formalise that structure is of limited use, since habits are by no means fixed. The rules supposedly isolated — of combination of food types, hot and cold, wet and dry, and so on — are themselves as subject to change as the foods they govern, since those rules are cultural, and culture develops. Certainly, habit might explain our preferences in the short term, as a society or as individuals, since the preparation of well-known foods may well be easier than constant experimentation:

*Yes, the basis of why we get in a rut is, I suppose, that the decision as to what we will eat that evening is taken in the thirty seconds before we run out of the door in the morning. "What are we going to have for tea tonight? Oh God!" The two phrases run together. It's like "Partick Thistle, Nil". It's a sort of logical follow-on. Or "Sod Baldrick", you know?*

ANNE *I just think it's a generally healthier diet if you eat a more balanced diet, with less red meat. We eat so much red meat, we probably go over the top.*

Q. Why do you think you eat so much?

PETER *Because it's easy. Erm, no. Probably not easy, no. Because we think it's easy, because that's what we've been used to cooking, because we don't have the time or the inclination to go out of our way and to say "Right, we could do this or that instead". I mean, a chilli for instance, we make it automatically, and it's very easy.*

The range of ingredients and repertoire of recipes familiar to a particular cook is likely to constitute a factor limiting change, and having safely consumed something once, we can be reasonably confident that it is not harmful. Experiments have demonstrated, for example, that although capable of adapting to new foods rats will normally adopt them only if familiar foods are unavailable and then only slowly. Whilst it would be wrong to suggest that our behaviour is necessarily the same as the rat's, it is also perhaps arrogant to hold that we are entirely free of biological influences. Of humans, too, Simoons notes that:

*The suggestion that unfamiliarity with an animal may contribute to the rejection of its flesh appears to have considerable merit. An "emancipated" Westerner will often refuse the flesh of strange animals, partly perhaps from fear that it will cause illness but also from reluctance to partake of something new (Simoons, 1967: 112).*

Although apparently rational, Simoons's circular explanations tell us little. Why should the Westerner suspect an unfamiliar animal to be less healthy than a familiar one if it is known that others enjoy that animal's flesh? Reluctance to partake of the new is



self-evident, and little more. Simoons is unwilling to recognise that our own behaviour can also be influenced by rejection of the unknown, even if we represent that rejection to ourselves in logical terms such as of contagion. Fortunately, in discussing less "emancipated" cultures, Simoons feels able to venture further:

Primitive man views the flesh of unfamiliar animals with even greater trepidation, for it may be the means by which harmful spirits or other mysterious elements enter his body... The fear of eating an unfamiliar animal is frequently increased through its introduction by a disliked and feared donor group, who might do serious harm or might be regarded as unclean... [For example] certain Andaman Islanders... will not eat particular foods when they are away from their own sections of the islands, perhaps from fear that in a strange place the chances of illness are greater and the spirits are more dangerous (Simoons, 1967: 112).

This provides a more helpful clue to the danger associated with strange foodstuffs. The threat manifestly comes not only from direct contagion, but also from association with unwelcome ideas — in this case particularly with strangers. Habit can explain the perpetuation of preferences, but not *which* of them come to prominence over time. Traditions offer continuity with our individual and collective past. The benefit of familiarity or convenience is ideological as well as practical: we need not repeatedly tackle questions of classification, or confront ideas which might disturb and deter us.

Unfamiliar foods do not offer the same security since we are as unsure of their symbolic status as we are of their physical safety. The danger, in other words, is to our minds as much as to our bodies. In this we are no different from the so-called primitive peoples discussed by Simoons, tending to adhere to the culinary patterns of the culture with which we identify. This aspect of safety is particularly evident in the context of hospitality, when the danger is to one's social standing and in contact with foreign cultures:

*You can't go too far wrong with steaks. Everybody loves a steak; most people anyway. I think you're better if you tend to stick to chicken or steak: you're safe. Although it's nice to be adventurous occasionally.*

[Of self-catering British holidaymakers visiting Spain in 1987], nearly two thirds did not buy any food that they would not normally eat at home, and just under half preferred to eat in their villa to local restaurants... Nearly everyone shunned locally-bought bacon and eggs, or cold meats, for breakfast: only one in 20 overcame their nerves and gave them a try (*The Independent*, 25 Jan. 1988: 1).

*At one stage I was translating for the Dutch consul, and... the Scots wifies, they would get the number from the Consul, phone me, and say give me a Dutch menu. And then I would say — such and such a soup, and they'd say "Oh, that's lovely! And I'll put a little bit of this or that in"... and I'd let that one pass. And then you gave the main course, and the question would be "Would it matter if it was*



*mashed potatoes — and beef instead of pork?" "Yes it would! Because the whole idea is that.....". And by the end they had such lovely British menus! And they'd hang up the phone and I'd think, what the hell am I doing? I'm stopping this!*

*If it's mince they ask you if it's beef minced.*

Q. Why?

*I realised after I got the job that I had hidden problems with my foreignness. It had a lot to do with food... And it was often hidden and so politely camouflaged that it didn't click for a long time... [One] was particularly difficult. She asked me what I put in her mince... and I wasn't even cooking! And I could see what was happening in her mind. Well, because we eat horsemeat on the continent. How she thought I could get a horse and put it in the mince I don't know...*

TO ASCRIBE CHANGING EATING HABITS to changing tastes is to fall into the logical trap described by Wittgenstein as "a kind of general disease of thinking which always looks for (and finds) what would be called a mental state from which all our acts spring as from a reservoir... Thus one says, 'the fashion changes because the tastes of people change'. The taste is the mental reservoir" (Wittgenstein, 1969: 143). The error in the circular argument lies in using mental states to explain social phenomena — mental states also deduced from observing the same society. In other words, rather than explaining changes in meat eating habits as changing "tastes", it is more useful to consider the *meanings* of those tastes.

If a tradition persists, it is probably because the ideas embodied remain valued. If the taste for a particular food, such as meat, remains strong, then considerable effort may go into securing its regular supply. If not, it may indicate that other ideas have come to prominence. Traditions, whether those of the individual, the family, or the nation, can and do change, just as habits can be broken. According to Markey (1986), for example, when English settlers colonised the Swan River in Western Australia in 1829 their diet, without the complication of contact with other cultures, was remarkably resistant to change in spite of the enormous change of their environment. It remained a stable element of culture until after the Second World War. Since the 1960s, however, dramatic changes have taken place in the diet and food habits of Western Australians, at a time, Markey suggests, when the society had been changing its mind about other matters too. Food may not only be "cultural spoor" but, when changes occur, a cultural omen. Changes in long-maintained habits may signal deep-rooted social change. George Orwell, indeed, regarding nutrition as such an important reflection of the lives that people live, suggests:

I think it could be plausibly argued that changes of diet are more important than changes of dynasty or even of religion (Orwell, 1937: 82).





The revived popularity of wholemeal bread mentioned earlier, for example, is not fully explained by the internal dynamics of competing social classes seeking to outdo or to emulate each other in a constantly repeating cycle. Seen against a general movement away from highly refined products towards more “natural” versions perceived to be healthier — including not only brown bread, but also, for example, brown rice and brown sugar — it can be seen as a signal of changing attitudes towards the excessive industrialisation of food. Naturalness is part of the signification of wholefoods in general and wholefoods have seen a distinct revival in recent years. It is a value that has been coming back into fashion. It is a flavour which society has been learning, once again, to appreciate. It is a question of changing taste.

# 4

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## Symbolism

*...not just a meal... a way of life.*

— MEAT TRADES JOURNAL

WHY CALL MEAT A NATURAL SYMBOL? It might seem common sense that meat is anything but a symbol — it is substantial: literally, in the flesh. The word *symbol* is used in many and various ways by anthropologists and others. Often it seems to be assumed that an unproblematic distinction exists between the symbolic and the literal which corresponds to that between the abstract and the concrete, or perhaps between fantasy and fact. In this chapter I wish to show that such divisions are far from straightforward, and that meat's symbolic value can be barely distinguishable from its practical utility.

Humans the world over put everyday objects and actions to expressive use, the treatment of food being a prime example. Perhaps this is because it is one item that everybody, everywhere needs. Perhaps eating is deeply meaningful since, along with only a few other similarly significant acts, such as sex and defecation, it involves a breaching of normally sacrosanct bodily boundaries. Perhaps it is important that when we eat meat or other foodstuffs we literally incorporate into our own bodies the physical material — and maybe the spiritual essence — of other animals and of the outside world in general. Whatever the reason, we use food to express relationships not only amongst ourselves but also with our environment.



The food habits of foreign cultures or of minority groups within our own society may seem strange, and therefore encourage us to look for extra meanings — of something expressive. But those of the majority within our own society are just as expressive, and might seem equally strange to outsiders. We all have habits to which we and our peers conform that pass as normality, and which our offspring are encouraged to accept whilst quite young.

## 2. Children learn our society's normal food habits through various examples



Adherence to such group behaviour, however, does more than show similarity in taste or in traditional cuisine. Since foods are used to represent particular *values*, the sharing of food or of ways of eating it can be an eloquent statement of shared ideology and as such expresses group affiliation. Conversely, those who diverge from community standards will commonly be stigmatised, since their dietary non-conformity is (correctly) taken to indicate broader differences. Consider, for example, the dismissive tone and marginalising vocabulary in an American sociologist's treatment of alternative diets:

In studies of social movement and the formation of sects and dissident groups, the role of food cannot be underestimated. In adhering to some dietary rules, what to eat, when to eat, or when not to eat, groups maintain control over their members. They also require members to deviate from the general population when they venture outside their group. This behavior is one of the most effective ways of assuring adherence to special group codes. Vegetarianism,



which has recently attracted a variety of individuals and been intimately connected with several modern movements (Barkas, 1975) might serve as an example. It is hard to find a common denominator among these groups, except that they are all in some way intent on establishing a difference and attracting attention to it. A more recent phenomenon seems to be the fad for "natural foods," which often corresponds to some political and social dogma and thereby serves to bring adherents together. Other current varieties of diets and food fads are ways of establishing solidarity with other people by fasting or refusing certain foods. Thus, there seems to be a continuous tradition of establishing group memberships through eating from the totemic past to the present day (Back, 1977: 31-32).

This writer seems desperate to define a neat categorisation of such individuals according to the source of their "fad". There are overtones of conspiracy theory, with groups "maintaining control" over members who must conform to "some political or social dogma". The disparaging use of terms such as *fad* and *brainwashing* in such value-loaded description is in implicit opposition to the presumed rational normality of the majority diet, and the majority dogma. Back's evident confusion lies in his inability to recognise the diversity of ideas and meanings involved, not only in the minority groups he isolates but also within the dominant culture with which he evidently identifies. He assumes that vegetarianism ought to mean much the same thing to all vegetarians, and is perplexed since the only common attribute he can advance is their "difference", to which he weakly and unjustifiably ascribes a ubiquitous desire to attract attention.

Certainly, foods are used by groups (including families) to show affiliation and to express apparent solidarity through their inherently imprecise symbolism. Since the founding of anthropological study this function of obtaining and sharing food has been noted — indeed it has been suggested that commensality may be the most important basis of human associations (Darlington, 1969). W. Robertson Smith noted that "those who eat and drink together are by this very act tied to one another by a bond of friendship and mutual obligation" (Robertson Smith, 1889: 247), and Radcliffe-Brown held that for the Andaman Islanders "by far the most important social activity is the getting of food" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1922: 227).

But foods, like other goods, do not intrinsically symbolise. They are *used* to symbolise. According to Barthes (1975), food is not just a product, but it is a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behaviour. The cooked dinner of meat and two vegetables that symbolises the woman's obligation as homemaker and her husband's as breadwinner in South Wales (Murcott, 1982), for example, does not intrinsically stand for home-making and caring — the cultural value is not that a



wife should give her husband such food. The *values* are their respective gender rôles, whilst the food is the *medium* through which that is communicated.

### 3. Cooking meat for her husband is a traditional wifely act



Source: *Guardian*, 27 July 1985: 35

This function of food is evident throughout our society:

Food is prestige, status and wealth... It is a means of communication and interpersonal relations, such as an 'apple for the teacher', or an expression of hospitality, friendship, affection, neighbourliness, comfort and sympathy in time of sadness or danger. It symbolises strength, athleticism, health and success. It is a means of pleasure and self-gratification and a relief from stress. It is feasts, ceremony, rituals, special days and nostalgia for home, family and the 'good old days'. It is an expression of individuality and sophistication, a means of self-expression and a way of revolt. Most of all it is tradition, custom and security.

Different foods satisfy these needs and beliefs of people in different cultures. Some foods are linked to the age and sex of the individual... There are Sunday foods and weekday foods, family foods and guest foods; foods with magical properties, and health and disease foods (Todhunter, 1973: 301).

*...it sort of came as a final rejection of her cooking. It was actually at that level, when I was at home at the weekends. She was cooking lovely meals, and I was not eating the meat, which everyone else was enthusing over: it was "a beautiful piece of roast you've got this weekend", and "oh, it's lovely tender lamb for this time of year". And I was saying that I don't want it. And it was — it was like rejecting part of her... part of what she'd given me.*

The attempt by an out-group to change its status with respect to the in-group... commonly involves conforming to the food customs of the in-group, either adopting, or more usually abandoning, the use of particular types of flesh (Simoons, 1967: 121)



*I suppose deeper than that people want to be a bit different. In this world where, you know, five thousand people troop in on the same train as you, and five thousand troop out on the same train as you, it's a search for individuality. It's a statement: I am different; I am a vegetarian; I am more interesting — which obviously is not necessarily true.*

Whatever his inhibitions and tastes, Western man believes in the natural holiness of seminudism and raw vegetable juice, because these have become for him symbols of unadulterated nature (Dubos, 1979: 17).

*I mean I suppose, unconsciously, in various things it has followed on from being involved with the people I was involved with, and the peace groups and things tend to have a lot of vegetarians, and they tend to set you thinking about it I suppose subconsciously.*

Meat is just a way of life for British families

Sir — You may not consider it very important, but I'd like to tell you a simple story about a piece of pork.

Myself and my family bought it on Saturday for our Sunday lunch.

It was an attractive joint and, despite some good Saturday night TV, the prospect of the meat remained in our minds and there was a hint of expectation on all our faces.

For three hours on Sunday the smell of it cooking practically drove us wild. When we finally sat down at the table, all the troubles of the week seemed to drift away at the prospect of a delicious family lunch.

The meat was wonderful and I thought how much the £5 joint had contributed to this typically British, family scene. My family left the table feeling well-fed and happy and the cold meat made a meal on Monday night as well.

Meat is not just a meal, it is a way of life.

T. Cook. Basildon Essex

(*Meat Trades Journal*, 2. July 1987)

Like all consumption of food; like all consumption of material goods; like all communication by shared ideas and shared symbols... meat is not just a meal, it is a way of life.

THAT ANIMALS HAVE BEEN KILLED to give sustenance to humans is obvious to the point of banality and is implicit in the very definition of meat. However, the inherent conquest is rarely discussed overtly in the context of food provision. We stress instead meat's scientifically recognised function in terms of health and nutrition as the principle determinant of its status. From this, it is generally assumed, its value as an item of economic exchange is derived which, according to the laws of supply and demand, sets its market price as a sort of secondary governing factor. Sometimes it is also recognised to have a slight symbolic importance, such as in the case of the macho steak which, like the macho car, is purported to indicate sexual prowess, or such as the view that its importance or



prestige may be a sort of social relic from when we hunted to survive or from royal hunting in Days Of Olde.

Our tendency to avoid confronting certain aspects of meat's identity is highly significant. It is more than a matter of preferring to sidestep that which might be unpleasant. The fact that we make little mention of the domination which is inherent in rearing animals for slaughter in order to eat them does not indicate that it is irrelevant. On the contrary, in common with much symbolic communication, that which remains unsaid about meat conveys an added dimension of meaning which is *particularly* potent. It is the very taken-for-grantedness of much that is implicit in the meat system that makes its message so powerful.

In common usage the term symbolic indicates a mode of communication that is distinct from direct, literal, discourse. Objects, ideas, or actions, are called symbolic when they represent something beyond their obvious identities. A flag is symbolic because it is more than a piece of decorative cloth; mention of a dove may be symbolic because, by common consent, it represents the concept of peace. Dan Sperber professes to employ a refinement of this usage in the field:

I note then as symbolic all activity where the means put into play seem to me to be clearly disproportionate to the explicit or implicit end, whether this end be knowledge, communication or production — that is to say, all activity whose rationale escapes me. In short, the criterion I use in the field is in fact one of irrationality (Sperber, 1975: 4).

Although it clearly has functional value, meat certainly qualifies in these terms as a symbolic quantity since its economic and social importance in many cultures, including our own, is greater than might be anticipated from its purely nutritional value.

But restricting the definition of the symbolic to that deemed irrational raises further problems, if only because it assumes the existence of pure rationality in behaviour and the possibility of identifying it. However, in Needham's decided view: "Men do not reason often; they do not reason for long at a time; and when they do reason they are not very good at it" (Needham, 1978: 69). Or, as Benjamin Franklin observes in his autobiography, "So convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable Creature*, since it enables one to find or make a Reason for everything one has a mind to do" (LeMay & Zall, 1986: 28; italics in original). The distinction is arbitrary and untenable, as rational behaviour almost invariably exhibits non-rational or even apparently irrational aspects, whilst seemingly meaningless phenomena can have surprisingly significant implications —



rationality is very much in the eye of the beholder, and is conditioned by the cultural environment from which we can never entirely escape.

Modern Western society is widely reputed to be based on logical principles (such as economic efficiency, material well being, and the quest for scientific understanding) and we contentedly believe that we have abandoned most of our primitive superstitions. But such views merely perpetuate what Geertz (1973: 120-123; 1983) calls the "primitive mentality" formulation, by which we intellectually divorce what we regard as scientifically true from that which we accept might be mythically true, in the belief that we are able to distinguish one from the other by virtue of our advanced philosophy, or in other words in the belief that we have transcended that "primitive" stage. Notions of pure economics or scientific health maintenance, however, are modern mythologies (see *Mythologiques Modernes*) and bear little resemblance to the real social world in which we transact our lives. When nutritionists or policy-makers discuss the energy, fat, or protein contents of foods, for example, and expect a willing public dutifully to adapt their habits, they are deceiving themselves in failing adequately to accommodate the numerous other rôles that food plays in people's lives. Some nutritional "authorities" seem to live in a science-fiction world of adult fantasy, alien to those of us who simply enjoy buying and eating food:

Another transatlantic viewpoint was given by Dr Carl Unger, a meat consultant based in Georgia, USA, who projected a picture of computerised shopping in the mid-1990s.

He predicted that the shopper would use a computer to work out daily dietary and nutritional needs. These would be translated into a number of dishes and meal components which would be ordered from the local supermarket (*British Meat*, Summer 1987: 3).

To understand modern Western society it is necessary to step outside our own self-image, and to appreciate that the entire edifice of economic development is a social and ideological as well as a material pursuit, a symbolic as well as a logical endeavour. Throughout this work therefore, my aim is to treat our own society with similar detachment, similar scepticism, similar curiosity, as would be orthodox for any other culture. I wish not automatically to accord modern Western society the privilege of purported higher reason but to regard our ways of thought as just as exotic as any in the world. We are all natives now!

Symbolism is more than ethereal associations which somehow affect our otherwise rational judgement. That is only the surface of an infinite system of thought that can be implicit or explicit, private or public, personal or general. Nutrition and economics, for example, are themselves symbolic. As Sahlins observes:



At first glance the confrontation of the cultural and material logics does seem unequal. The material process is factual and independent of man's will; the symbolic, invented and therefore flexible. The one is fixed by nature, the other is arbitrary by definition. Thought can only kneel before the absolute sovereignty of the physical world. But the error consists in this: that there is no material logic apart from the practical interest, and the practical interest of men in production is symbolically constituted (Sahlins, 1976: 207)

Our goods are of communicative, at least as much as of utilitarian, value — they are good to appreciate (and to be seen with by others who share our view of their value) as well as to consume. As Douglas and Isherwood have argued, "the problem goes so deep that nothing less profound than a corrected version of economic rationality is needed" (1980: 4):

First, the very idea of consumption itself has to be set back into the social process, not merely looked upon as a result or objective of work. Consumption has to be recognized as an integral part of the same social system that accounts for the drive to work, itself part of the social need to relate to other people, and to have mediating materials for relating to them. Mediating materials are food, drink, and hospitality of home to offer, flowers and clothes to signal shared rejoicing, or mourning dress to share sorrow. Goods, work, and consumption have been artificially abstracted out of the whole social scheme. The way the excision has been made damages the possibility of understanding these aspects of our life (Douglas & Isherwood, 1980: 4).

This is true not only of economic behaviour but also of our consumption of food and particularly of animal flesh. The fact that we routinely explain meat's importance with reference to its nutritional value, or indeed its economic value, should not be accepted as the privileged level of explanation which it normally enjoys. Our *concentration* on such aspects, to the regular exclusion of additional social influences which may be at least as influential, should be looked at as a social fact in its own right. We must ask why we seem to be so much more comfortable dealing in these scientific terms than in the realm of symbolic association in which so much of our daily life is steeped. For everything we do encompasses values in addition to the obvious. Paintings do more than decorate; clothing does more than clothe — and meat does more than feed. As Anthony Cohen puts it:

When guests compliment their host for having laid a good fire, they probably mean more than that he has achieved a commendable thermal output for a given quantity of fuel (Cohen, 1986: 3)

Whilst a symbolic form may be constant, its meaning can vary widely. The principle meaning of a word, a thing, or an action, rarely explains its significance adequately — or as Ricoeur puts it: "The working hypothesis underlying the notion of metaphorical statement is that the semantics of discourse is not reducible to the semiotics of lexical entities" (Ricoeur, 1978: 66). The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, for



example, defines meat as “The flesh of animals used for food”, and a few subsidiary and archaic variations; but its common usage as a synonym for “essence” is not even mentioned (eg. “The meat of the argument”). Whilst meat as food may be its principle accepted meaning, it falls far short of conveying the elusive depth of its signification. To one person the word *steak* might suggest a substance whereby affluence or culinary skill can be demonstrated; it might conjure up memories of celebratory dinners by candlelight; it might reassure about the consumption of good, body-building nutrition. To another it might stand for cruelty and nausea, with thoughts of horrific conditions in which animals are bred and slaughtered, and images of violence, blood, brutality. No two people will find quite the same meanings in the same word.

However, the very ambiguity which prevents symbolic meanings from being given literal definitions allows them to be pressed into service in a diversity of contexts. Two “vegetarians”, for example, might share a perceived unity, though in fact having few views in common at all. It is easy to share a characteristic with others, so long as we each adhere to our own view of that feature. For Anthony Cohen, the efficacy of symbols:

is their capacity to express in ways which allows their common forms to be retained among the members of a group, and among different groups, whilst not imposing upon these people the yoke of uniform meaning. Symbols, being malleable in this way, can be made to ‘fit’ circumstances. They thus provide media through which individuals and groups can experience and express their attachment to a society without compromising their individuality. So versatile are symbols that they can often be bent into these idiosyncratic shapes of meaning without such distortions becoming apparent to other people who use the ‘same’ symbol at the same time (Cohen, 1986: 9).

Truth can be seen as relative, or as something like “symbolic truth”, since it is belief and image upon which individuals base their actions, not absolute fact. This accounts for many apparent contradictions in our behaviour. For example, amid widespread distrust of factory food production, pork and chicken — in spite of being intensively farmed — continue to sell relatively well, partly because being less bloody they have been marketed as white meat, and therefore less graphically meaty, and so implicitly better. Game is similarly favoured as wild, even if a high proportion of deer carcasses in the shops in fact derive from farmed stock.

Each meaning, and countless others, is true for the individuals concerned, extending the significance of the name of a particular meat, or of meat in general, far beyond its function as a foodstuff. It is the totality of these ideas which combine to form a language, and which constitute culture. Ricoeur argues that even the simplest verbal message must be interpreted since words are polysemic and take their meaning from the connection with a



particular context and a particular audience (Ricoeur, 1978: 216-256). This is true of more than language:

Although formulated with respect to texts, Ricoeur's theory of interpretation can be extended to other domains. The extension to the sphere of the social sciences is rendered possible by the claim that action may be regarded as text (Thompson, 1981: 15).

Thinking, in the words of Clifford Geertz, is the "manipulation of cultural forms, and outdoor activities like ploughing and peddling are as good examples of it as closet experiences like wishing or regretting" (Geertz, 1983: 151). Analysis of symbolism, he holds, is necessary to understanding the community, not ancillary to it, since thought itself:

is a matter of trafficking in the symbolic forms available in one or another community (language, art, myth, theory, ritual, technology, law, and that conglomerate of maxims, recipes, prejudices and plausible stories that the smug call common sense) (Geertz, 1983: 153).

Rather than make a distinction between symbolic ideas and non-symbolic ideas, or symbolic action and non-symbolic action, I would be more encouraged by a view that was aware of symbolic aspects in all our ideas and actions. Thus economics and technology are symbolic in the very same sense as unicorns or religious icons, though they undoubtedly differ in both their form and content. The word symbol is best understood as little more than a rough subclass of the word idea, which may relate to an external reality, but which ultimately means no more nor less than what people take it to mean.

A SYMBOL may be an idea which is openly discussed, or one so rare or so common that is barely recognised. Sperber (1975) referred to "tacit knowledge"; Douglas (1975) to "implicit meanings"; Firth (1973) to "private symbols". Although each deals with a different emphasis, their common topic is concepts that may rarely be elucidated but which constitute the routine context for our actions, being mysteriously but effectively circulated.

Sperber (1975) argues that symbols, by their very character, cannot be identified precisely: that it is in the very nature of symbolism to be imprecise and indefinable. This is debatable. Whilst symbolic ideas — like all formulations — are certainly imprecise, it is questionable whether they are intrinsically indefinable, or merely undefined. Certainly much highly effective symbolic communication operates at an unexplicated level, but this does not mean that their principal effective meanings are intractably resistant to analysis. Symbolism, sometimes at least, deals not with that which *cannot* be categorised and dealt



with rationally, and so incorporated into everyday speech, but broadly that which is *not* or *has not been* so classified and expressed. That a particular meaning associated with a symbol is not normally articulated does not demonstrate that it cannot be — rather, an idea can be all the more persuasive for being unvoiced.

The interaction of these levels of communication is perhaps best illustrated by example. Advertisers and marketing executives are well aware that people buy more than utilitarian objects. Successful sales people offer “lifestyles” and aspirations rather than function, and promote messages which operate at a range of levels. As Barthes puts it:

...the product as bought — that is, experienced — by the consumer is by no means the real product; between the former and the latter there is a considerable production of false perceptions and values... It is obvious that such deformations and reconstructions are not only the manifestation of individual, anomic prejudices, but also elements of a veritable collective imagination showing the outlines of a certain mental framework (Barthes, 1975: 49).

For example, a motor car is typically marketed in terms of comfort, economy, power (“to cope with emergencies”), and prestige, often with the implied promise of sexual success for the probable male purchaser, but these messages will be manifest in different forms. The most explicit messages will tend to concern the reputedly rational considerations that the potential buyer will be happy to recognise and debate publicly. Other meanings, concerning for example the lifestyle to which the target is characterised as aspiring, are unlikely to be spelled out in the text but are nonetheless written in the situations portrayed, through the use of subtle cues.

Barthes (1975) identifies three themes that stand out in food advertising — the commemorative, eroticism, and health — arguing that this reflects the collective psychology more than it shapes it. But whether it is to sell the chicken or the egg, it is clear that much of the power of advertising’s symbolic suggestion lies in its unvoiced, implicit nature. The suggestion is most powerful as part of the taken-for-granted context, rather than as the overtly propagated message. Indeed, an idea can have very different meanings depending upon the whether it principally circulates at the implicit or the explicit level, perhaps because only when brought to awareness do ideas become open to criticism. The motorist who secretly sees his sports car as indicating virility might feel less comfortable when openly mocked by others for his “penis substitute”, for example. In another context, Katharine Whitehorn, writing about incest in the *Observer* (2. Aug. 1987), suggests that:



the usefulness of taboos is that they are rules which *seem* unbreakable. Morality may be about choices, but it's a lot easier to be moral if the temptation simply doesn't come up, as drugs did not when I was a gal. When something is just not on the social agenda, you don't have to be a saint to resist it; once it's discussed, even to be deplored, the case is altered.

The taboo, in this case, is an unvoiced, symbolic sanction, whose power rests in its very implicitness. Ms Whitehorn fears that by having to make the discussion explicit by tackling the problem head on, that power will be dissipated, though she believes that it may yet be necessary since the evident failure of silence suggests that explicit interdiction may now be more appropriate, even if that risks demystifying the topic:

In a marginal situation... a man might regard an impulse to touch his daughter with less horror if he knew that other men felt it, too; and... accepting the impulse might be one stage nearer acting on it.

The unvoiced, implicit, taken-for-granted status of the cultural knowledge makes incest a powerful proscription, like cannibalism, with which Ms Whitehorn compares it. The very imprecision of the symbolism, far from being a drawback, is central to its efficacy. Were the *reasons* for not permitting sex between adults and small children, or for the association between car and sex, to be voiced, or more precisely rendered, they would be open to discussion, demystification, and dispute, and might rapidly lose their effect. The power of the ideas depends upon being communicated without being rendered explicit for their meaning can then be understood by those to whom they are significant, but at the level of assumption, common sense, and accepted fact.

In just such a way, I suggest, meat has long conveyed a set of implicit inter-related values — which our accepted rationalisations partly serve to obscure. Paradoxically, this obscurity preserves and perpetuates the influence of these implicit meanings since, not being recognised, they can scarcely be challenged. Veal, for example, enjoyed high prestige for many years partly, I suggest, *because of* the extreme subjugation of the creatures intrinsic to its production. That, however, was seldom voiced; instead its value was explicitly attributed to such qualities as tenderness, delicate flavour, and light colour. Once, however, the methods of its production were brought into the domain of explicit public consideration, they became generally seen as intolerably cruel, at which time this previously inherent meaning lost its positive power and instead became a negative influence on the meat's popularity.

What was true for veal yesterday, may also become true for meat in general tomorrow. In the chapters that follow I shall show that the unvoiced symbolic values which continue to underpin its popularity amongst most people today, principally concern



our relationship with nature, as we perceive it. In this way changing attitudes to meat, as revealed by changing habits, may also be eloquent commentary on fundamental developments in society. Meat's signification, I will suggest, principally relates to environmental control, and it has long held an unrivalled status amongst major foods on account of this meaning. But just as white bread once revealed discrimination and social status, only later to fall in esteem when part of its symbolic load — industrial refinement — became perceived more negatively, so meat's stature is not inherent in its substance, but has been invested in it by successive generations who highly valued its meaning: who *liked* the notion of power over nature. Its waning prestige — and outright rejection by many — may be indicative of more than changing tastes in food. Thus meat is a Natural Symbol.



# **MEAT**

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## **A NATURAL SYMBOL**

### **Meat is Muscle**

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# 5

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## Evolution & Elevation

All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others.

— GEORGE ORWELL, *ANIMAL FARM*

Agriculture stood to land as cooking did to raw meat. It converted nature into culture. Uncultivated land meant uncultivated men...

— KEITH THOMAS, *MAN AND THE NATURAL WORLD*: 15

*HOMO SAPIENS SAPIENS* is unique among the primates for the high proportion of meat in the diet of so many of its members. Until quite recently it was a generally accepted truth that our closest relatives in evolutionary terms were exclusively vegetarian, but this has recently been shown to be incorrect. Other apes do naturally eat some meat, though considerably less frequently, and in lesser overall amounts, than do most humans, its role in their diet being essentially that of an occasional source of rare nutrients (Goodall, 1965). Adult male chimpanzees, for example, eat non-insect meat perhaps once every two weeks (Teleki & Harding, 1981). But:

As we move up the evolutionary ladder we cannot escape the observation that with the exception of *Homo sapiens sapiens* the primates are essentially vegetarian, and that the origins of man's omnivorous eating go back at least two million years and are of special significance to a world threatened with overpopulation by that particular primate (Hawthorn, 1981: 370).

The fact that our society presumed for so long that non-human primates did not eat any meat at all is significant in itself. I will show that meat-eating is a trait by which we, like many human groups throughout the world, characterise ourselves as human. A



modern writer on deer hunting, for example, casually defines emergent humanity by the beginnings of skilled hunting, and progress by the development of more efficient technology:

The basic principle, from the time that Neolithic Man, feeling peckish no doubt, first stalked a Mastodon... has been to get as close as possible to one's quarry to be able to kill it with the minimum of risk to one's self. Man, ever a hunter for food, used his mental skills to help him and developed his weapons accordingly... Of course, once gunpowder came on the scene, the picture changed. Prior to that taking deer was by driving to traps or to an enclosed place where they could be slaughtered (horribly reminiscent of the Faroes whale killings), or by hunting with hounds. But now, Man could resuscitate his stalking skills (Bowser, 1986: 22).

This short reference to when Man "first stalked" game in search of food implicitly suggests to the reader, firstly, that until that indeterminate point in prehistory humans had not hunted other animals, but had presumably lived on a vegetarian diet; secondly that the reason for that change was shortage of food; thirdly that the development of stalking skills was an important advance in the evolution of the species to a higher level of civilisation; fourthly, that hunting is properly a predominantly male pursuit; and fifthly that the activity of hunting in the modern world is essentially a continuation of a timeless tradition. I will consider some of the assumptions and value judgements underlying these points in this chapter. Usually, however, these implicit suggestions are not explicitly elaborated but are communicated at just such a level of common knowledge, and are all the more influential for that uncritical acceptance.

Archaeological evidence is generally interpreted as suggesting that pre-*Homo sapiens* groups began to move from a primarily foraging way of life towards hunting between two and four million years ago (Lancaster, 1968), and that most of the major biological and technical developments that are used to characterise modern races, such as tool-making, the sexual division of labour, and of course hunting activity, began around that period. The development of hunting, according to some, may have been even more significant in the evolution of modern humanity than the later development of agriculture. "Agricultural ways of life have dominated less than 1 per cent of human history, and there is no evidence of major biological changes during that period of time", so it is for this reason, the argument goes, that "the consideration of hunting is so important for the understanding of human evolution" (Washburn & Lancaster, 1968: 293, 294).



The idea that hunting is central to the development of culture is not confined to academic research, however; it is simply a well-known fact. Indeed, the theoretical conviction of expert commentators may derive as much from modern presumptions about past states as from rigorous analysis of the scant evidence. This phenomenon has a long and proud history:

In the conjectural history which became increasingly popular during the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, man's victory over other species was made the central theme. The true origin of human society, it was said, lay in the combination of men to defend themselves against wild beasts. Then came hunting and domestication (Thomas, 1983: 28).

Although archaeology is undeniably able to teach us a great deal about our pre-historic past, the extent to which it is sometimes based upon speculative reconstruction from modern evidence and presumptions is hardly a matter of dispute. Kevin Jones, for example, writing on archaeological method and theory in the context of hunting and scavenging by early hominids, explicitly states that research is founded on the theory of natural selection (with all the problems of equifinality entailed in attempts to trace backwards from history) and on predictions from evolutionary ecology, and is supported by studies of modern hunter-gatherers. Theoretical prediction, he says, can then be tested against actual remains (Jones, 1984). In other words, conjectural notions about prehistory are based upon modern suppositions, which are then said to be confirmed if the archaeological evidence does not excessively contradict them. In addition, the assumption that contemporary peoples who subsist off the land are akin to primitive humans of millions of years ago might indicate a measure of implicit racism. Nonetheless, commentators so often write as if social conditions, and even thoughts and ideas, can be straightforwardly read from the meagre flotsam and jetsam of long-extinct communities.

The argument usually put forward is that the development of hunting stimulated and necessitated radical changes in human abilities and organisation, marking the emergence of humanity as we conceive it. Civilisation is thus literally ascribed to dominion over other animals — the winning of control over the wild, non-human world. The popular *Hamburger Book*, for example, informs its audience that progression to meat-eating was a characteristic of emergent humanity:

Meat has been a favorite food of mankind for something like 4 million years. Although archaeological findings have revealed that pre-man (a species of advanced ape) existed as early as 14 million years ago, those creatures are believed to have been vegetarian... Then, in about 4 million B.C., a transition phase began during which the advanced ape began to



develop into composite ape-man... learning to kill for his food with rocks, stout tree limbs, or whatever other natural object lay about him. He was on his way to becoming a habitual meat-eater (Perl, 1974: 13)

Robin Fox promotes a similar vision of the early origins of humankind, in asserting that:

Our ancestors would have been vegetarian primates [but] somewhere between two and three million years ago this ancestor took up hunting and scavenging on a large scale. It was already bipedal, but the change from sporadic meat eating to a diet incorporating more than 50 per cent meat meant a radical change in the relations between the sexes and between the old and young males. It is these changes that *created* man as we know him for... the unprecedented rapidity of the evolution of the hominid brain (a threefold increase inside two million years) occurred exactly during the period when the scale of hunting increased — and increased in proportion (Fox, 1985: 8-9; italics in original).

Fox's reasons for indicating the causal relationship implied are obscure, but his association of emergent humanity with control of animals is conventional, particularly in his relating these issues to the development of abilities including rationality and dexterity, and masculine pre-eminence. He *attributes* the unequal relationship between the genders to the quest for meat, with the following argument:

Let us take it from the male point of view. In the 'winner-take-all' type of competition sheer strength is what counts; in the primate 'hierarchical' competition it is more control and timing; in the hunting situation it is obviously the ability to provide meat — to provision the females and children. But it is much more complex than this: strength, control and hunting ability cumulate in importance, but many other qualities must accrue to a successful dominant male in a co-operative hunting society. Leadership, organizational ability, and even such burgeoning talents as eloquence, shamanistic skills, etc. eventually come to characterize 'dominance' and hence breeding advantage... But the major point for males is that they had to develop intelligent solutions to the hunting challenge in all its facets; there was therefore a premium on intelligence over and above the other skills.

From the female point of view, the essential change lay in the division of labour forced on them by the new hunting way of life. Essentially, hominid females were the producers of vegetable food — for the omnivorous diet — for meat they depended on the males. Equally, the males depended on the females for two essential services that did not exist in the primate 'baseline' situation: gathering and preparation of vegetable food, and care and provision for the more slowly maturing young (Fox, 1985: 9).

Serge Moscovici too, in *Society Against Nature*, argues that the crucial development in man's history was not the development of society but the change from a gathering to a hunting economy, which he too believes was also the origin of gender inequalities:



Man made himself into man when he set himself up as a hunter; in other words, when he tried to acquire definite skills and means in order to relate to a given environment and was thus genetically, socially and technically transformed... Such a definition is all-encompassing. It can be historically situated; it by-passes the restrictive preoccupation with tools and sustenance; and it links up with myth, ritual and individual emotional and intellectual interactions. It also includes men — predacious or hunting — of various species which once coexisted, such as *Australopithecus robustus* and *Homo habilis*; or succeeded each other, such as *Homo erectus* and *Homo sapiens*. It distanced and distinguished them from primates, not because the latter were primates, but because they were wholly dependent on vegetation (Moscovici, 1976: 30).

The orthodox assumption in each of these passages, as in so much modern thought, is that the advent of hunting necessitated changes in relationships between humans, as well as between humans and their environment. The process is perhaps best described in Washburn & Lancaster's influential article on *The Evolution of Hunting*:

We think that hunting and butchering large animals put a maximum premium on cooperation among males, a behavior that is at an absolute minimum among the nonhuman primates. It is difficult to imagine the killing of creatures such as cave bears, mastodons, mammoths — or *Dinotherium* at a much earlier time — without highly coordinated, cooperative action among males. It may be that the origin of male-male associations lies in the necessities of cooperation in hunting, butchering, and war (Washburn & Lancaster, 1968: 295-6).

A problem with such viewpoints is the recurring implicit assumption of causality: namely that the development of hunting by human groups not only *marked* the appearance of human society, complete with its division of labour on the basis of gender, but actually *fashioned* it. But the division is a matter of social convention, not of natural fact. This is evident from the wide range of different relationships between the genders which obtain in different cultures, and from the changing balance of power over time. Such sociobiological speculative history does little to further our understanding of the human past — that Fox and others focus on the hunting of meat as the source of our enduring cultural rôles is of far greater interest for what it reveals of our modern conceptions. Meat remains a central symbol of human dominion in the world, but the doctrine that the abomination of untamed nature must be overcome by marshalling our powers of wit and technology is above all a male creation and a male preserve. For example, the regular equation of women with uncivilised nature, by the dominant males in Western society and elsewhere, is related to this orientation (see Chapter 12). Fox, in deploying such arguments, plays the part allotted in his society to his gender in perpetuating this ideology of Man's (sic) control of his physical and social world.



The bare facts of fundamental changes in human activities and capabilities, with parallel changes in the relationship between humans and their environment, are not in dispute:

Hunting changed man's relations to other animals and his view of what is natural. The human notion that it is normal for animals to flee, the whole concept of animals being wild, is the result of man's habit of hunting. In game reserves many different kinds of animals soon learn not to fear man, and they no longer flee... Prior to hunting, the relations of our ancestors to other animals must have been very much like those of the other noncarnivores. They would have moved close among the other species, fed beside them, and shared the same waterholes. But with the origin of human hunting, the peaceful relationship was destroyed, and for at least half a million years man has been the enemy of even the largest animals. In this way the whole human view of what is normal and natural in the relation of man to animals is a product of hunting, and the world of flight and fear is the result of the efficiency of the hunters (Washburn & Lancaster, 1968: 299).

Washburn and Lancaster attribute these changes to particular psychological motivations, which they seem to believe are a natural, and therefore necessary, aspect of human psychology — although their terminology unnecessarily obscures whether in this they refer uniquely to males or more generally to humans:

Behind this human view that the flight of animals from man is natural lie some aspects of human psychology. Men enjoy hunting and killing, and these activities are continued as sports even when they are no longer economically necessary... Part of the motivation for hunting is the immediate pleasure it gives to the hunter... In former times royalty and nobility maintained parks where they could enjoy the sport of killing, and today the United States government spends many millions of dollars to supply game for hunters. Many people dislike the notion that man is naturally aggressive and that he naturally enjoys the destruction of other creatures. Yet we all know people who use the lightest fishing tackle to prolong the fish's futile struggle, in order to maximize the personal sense of mastery and skill (Washburn & Lancaster, 1968: 299).

The natural inevitability of the (largely masculine) psychological drive towards domination implied is open to question. It is significant, for example, that the human virtues held to have been advanced in the process described by the above commentators are those normally ascribed to the males of the species, in the Western tradition at least. The recurrent stress upon such attributes as rationality, leadership, mastery, aggression, and male-male associations, and the consequently muted rôle implied for women, point to the possibility that this entire theoretical edifice may have been constructed to rationalise the reality of the traditional man's world. Similarly, the inherent implication that prior to the growth of hunting so long ago men and women were more



equal can be seen as obliquely sanctioning the inevitability of their ensuing differentiation, however those differences may be defined by our culture.

There exists a more subtle analysis than that of commentators who simultaneously view hunting as the cause and the primary characteristic of changes in human organisation. It is just as possible to describe the same circumstances from an alternative perspective, namely that the human species was experiencing rapid developments of all sorts during this period, and that embryonic culture, perceiving itself in a new light to be different from or superior to the rest of nature, found in hunting an avenue for the expression of that perception. Instead of implicitly or explicitly regarding the transition from gathering to hunting as the *cause* of human evolution, this can just as easily be represented as an *effect* of other developments. After all, an increase in meat intake was only one of a range of new characteristics that appeared over the period, and although from our contemporary vantage point we choose to pay particular attention to that feature, perhaps because of our recent particular preoccupation with dominance, it is interesting to note that as far as is known in the past, as in most non-industrial societies today, meat played only a minor role in the diet, constituting between 10-30% of food consumed. Moreover, whilst many people concentrate almost exclusively upon the development of hunting, it is recognised that other complex culinary and dietary discoveries, such as the storage, soaking, grinding and boiling of seeds, may have been at least as significant in liberating human groups from environmental constraints, enabling the spread of the species into new habitats, and paving the way for the development of agriculture (Washburn & Lancaster, 1968: 295).

The apparent fact of so many contemporaneous changes in human attributes and activities is worth considering, since different interpreters come to very different conclusions from consideration of the same evidence. Sally Slocum, for example, disputes the contemporary belief that prehistoric societies divided hunting and gathering between the genders on a pattern similar to that which is common today, and the assumption that this stimulated all the other known developments, including a "longer gestation period; more difficult birth; neoteny, in that human infants are less well developed at birth; long period of infant dependency; absence of body hair; year-round sexual receptivity of females...; erect bipedalism; possession of a large and complex brain that makes possible the creation of elaborate symbolic system, languages, and cultures, and also results in most behavior being under cortical control; food sharing; and finally, living in families" (1982: 476). Such interpretations, she suggests, may be seriously inaccurate, and merely reflect the prejudices of modern, masculine society. As she points out, the word "man" is



commonly used ambiguously in discussions of hunting, supposedly to mean the human species, but actually being synonymous with males (1982: 474). For example, since Washburn & Lancaster imply that it is only males who hunt, and causally relate most human characteristics to hunting, Slocum suggests that the implication is clear, quoting Jane Kephart:

Since only males hunt, and the psychology of the species was set by hunting, we are forced to conclude that females are scarcely human, that is, do not have built-in the basic psychology of the species: to kill and hunt and ultimately to kill others of the same species. The argument implies built-in aggression in human males, as well as the assumed passivity of human females and their exclusion from the mainstream of human development (Kephart, 1970: 5).

The evidence from anthropology, archaeology, psychology and genetics, Slocum argues, simply does not support the male-biased speculative interpretations that are loaded onto it: skills such as coordination, endurance, good vision, and cooperation are not carried on the Y chromosome. It is clearly arrant nonsense with one breath to relate hunting prowess to such skills as control, leadership and eloquence, and above all intelligence, and then to suggest that women are less well equipped to hunt than are men. Evidence that, on average, modern men are genetically better at judging distance and throwing accurately than are women (Kolakowski & Malina, 1974), and that women on the whole have better vision in dim light and have sharper hearing than men (McGuinness, 1976), do not prove that these characteristics determined their gender rôles, as is sometimes suggested (eg. Tannahill, 1988: 7-10). More highly developed abilities might just as well have evolved through competitive advantage in men's and women's socially prescribed functions. Even strength cannot adequately explain the imbalance as, even today after years of selective breeding, many women are stronger, fitter, and more agile than many men.

In addition, it can be suggested that increasing demands for food would in most cases have been most efficiently met by extending gathering range than by increasing the time devoted to hunting. Discoveries of tools may be labelled as weapons, but might just as well have been used to aid in gathering and preparing vegetable foods. In short:

By itself, hunting fails to explain any part of human evolution and fails to explain itself.

Anthropology has always rested on the assumption that the mark of our species is our ability to *symbol*, to bring into existence forms of behavior and interaction, and material tools with which to adjust and control the environment. To explain human nature as evolving from the desire of males to hunt and kill is to negate most of anthropology. Our species survived and



adapted through the invention of *culture*, of which hunting is simply a part (Slocum, 1982: 483).

If the Washburn & Lancaster argument were correct — that the postulated blood-lust was a new phenomenon of the period — it would still not be justifiable to infer that it was either a cause or a consequence of the development of hunting. It is just as probable that each were inter-related aspects of another unidentified trend. Perhaps the many developments in social organisation were taking place in any case, and new awareness of human capabilities simply enabled hunting to be undertaken more efficiently than previously had been possible, and a new feeling of human superiority was already finding symbolic expression through an increase in the hunting, killing, cooking, and eating of other creatures.

It is impossible to discuss even living people's mental processes with any level of certainty, and it is vastly more problematic where there is no direct access to exegetic explanations. Arguments about the psychological preferences of prehistoric people, based on assumed states of mind for which there is no direct evidence, are therefore best avoided (Binford, 1981). From the modern perspective, we cannot know with any certainty what our ancestors said and did, still less what they thought and felt. Any speculation can only be just that: speculation. Whenever we discuss the past — and particularly the prehistoric past — we do so from the perspective of the present, and these arguments are accordingly interesting for what they say of views current today. This is apparent in popular culture and casual conversation as well as in some academic discourse:

4. We sometimes model prehistory on our modern conceptions



Source: *The Flintstones: A story to colour*. London: Marvel (1988)



*It's because vegetables perhaps don't give you the same... we've been brainwashed into thinking that meat gives you more... a greater sense of well-being I suppose.*

Q. Brainwashed by whom?

*Generations of never having enough meat, I don't know. I mean, primitive man going out and sticking his spear through a passing wildcat, because meat was the way to get through, to have the strength to go and kill another one tomorrow. I mean, it's to do with the power of hunting, and feeding, and your family, and now we still have it, but it's come to be a sort of strange, gone-sideways...*

It is interesting that this informant assumes primitive man to have been willing to kill and consume carnivorous wildcat, although it is an item that would not appear on most modern menus. Archaeological evidence supports the view that human groups in times past selected their animal prey from a far wider range of species than the handful that are generally preferred in modern Western society (Marland, 1985), but it seems probable that wildcats were even then not widely eaten — if only because they are less common and generally more dangerous to catch than other species. Ascribing such behaviour to our pre-human forebears is an example of us inverting our normal values to characterise supposedly non-civilised people.

It is clear that more than one interpretation of the evidence is possible, and it seems likely that the interpretation we as a community have chosen, for what amounts to a pseudo-scientific origin myth, reflects what the dominant voices of our community have wished to believe of our past, in accordance with the preferred view of our present, as much as it reflects the reality of years gone by. It is more than coincidence that adherents to the Western world's major religion, Christianity, commonly ascribe the beginnings of meat-eating to the Fall, when humanity lost its innocence and so became fully human. Our more recent quasi-religion, science, has, it seems, merely accepted the convictions of the old order, translating existing assumptions into its own idiom and structure. Our intellectual establishment, largely dominated by male thought, has sought to authenticate itself by demonstrating a historical rationale for its own perspective.

Today, in singling out hunting, we ascribe the origins of humanity to our achievement of power and control over other animals. Whether or not speculative attempts at reconstructing prehistory are accurate in their chronology and description, they at least tell us that whenever our ancestors did begin to look upon themselves as meat-eaters, we have long regarded ourselves as carnivorous, at least potentially, and on the whole we continue to do so today. Above all, ascribing human nature to past developments, I suggest, reflects *current* notions of human nature, as shown by this statement from a businessman informant:



developments, I suggest, reflects *current* notions of human nature, as shown by this statement from a businessman informant:

*I mean, it comes back down to the "ease" bit. I mean, why did man become a hunter? Because it was easier to go out and kill a boar, that might take half an hour or an hour's work, than to forage about for the whole bloody day picking up berries. It's a lot easier.*

Hunting under normal circumstances is not a demonstrably more efficient means of obtaining nutrition than foraging, so why should it be believed to be so? For the answer we must recognise ease and convenience to be expressions of the values of one particular civilised society: ours. Hunting is not necessarily any more easy, but it is more civilised in that it is demonstrative of human power over the animals hunted, and civilisation is known as a state of greater ease. It is thus considered more civilised — more human — to hunt wild animals than to stoop to foraging for berries.

JUST AS THE BEGINNING OF HUNTING is suggested as the origin of human biology, society, and technology, so is the advent of farming held to be crucial in the development of civilisation, and control of nature is again at the heart of its definition. "The origin of agriculture", we are told, "was not an instant, chance discovery. Over tens of thousands of years people observed their environments, performed experiments, and gained skills and knowledge to produce a more stable food supply by controlling plants and animals at a place" (Harlan, 1976: 89). "Domestication of food animals occurred quite early in the Agricultural Revolution... The purpose of domestication was to secure animal protein reserves and to have animals serve as living food conserves" (Dando, 1980: 23).

Sherratt adds that the development of improved animal breeds — an aspect of what he calls the "secondary products revolution" — was a significant innovation in the development of complex economies, contributing to the process of intensification of production as one of the necessary technological advances (Sherratt, 1981). This same theme was developed by Leslie White who argued that the neolithic period saw a "great advance in cultural development... as a consequence of the great increase in the amount of energy harnessed and controlled per capita per year by means of the agricultural and pastoral arts" (White, 1949: 372). He further specified human effort as the primary source of paleolithic culture, as opposed to domesticated plant and animal resources of the neolithic.



They may be correct but control over nature, and over animals' reproduction, lives, and deaths, denotes the emergence of civilisation *metaphysically* as well as *physically*. By each commentator, human culture is directly equated with power, in the latter cases reified as "energy", and these are utterly orthodox views. To a considerable extent the whole of Western culture is orientated towards achievement and demonstration of such control. Science provides the expertise. Technological innovations, which we habitually regard as benefits in their own right, are tools for that task and intensification of production can be seen as an associated benefit. As Tannahill puts it, with domestication the "farmyard animal became, in effect, humanity's first power tool" (1988: 27). The emphasis falls squarely on the word power as much as on the word tool.

In similar vein, Zeuner claims the presence of the dog to be a good index of human evolution in the late pre-agricultural period, being used by hunters in Africa, Australia, and the Americas. The Eskimo, for example, used the dog for hunting, transport, and food at times of famine (Zeuner, 1963). The point at which we increased our power by using animals to control other animals indeed seems significant but the importance of such (anthropocentric) improvements is ideological as much as practical, demonstrative as well as enabling, affirmative just as it is effective. Domestication of animals, bringing them into the human fold, as part of our stable of resources, serves as a signal of human superiority, much as the acquisition of a large and powerful car (the capacity of which is still measured in horsepower) does more than propel the modern business executive rapidly between two points.

As with the development of hunting, none of these views on domestication and farming can be literally accepted as true accounts of the development of *Homo sapiens*, since attempts to reconstruct human history are inevitably conjectural. This does not, however, mean that views about human evolution are not of interest; merely that they may be significant as much for what they say of contemporary definitions of what it is to be human, as for anything they may say of the past.

HUMAN GROUPS THE WORLD OVER, according to Maurice Bloch, are concerned to resolve deep-rooted questions of identity — questions which commonly focus upon one particular problem:

how far is man separate or continuous with animals, plants and even geographical and cosmological events? The answer is, like any answer to this



fundamental question, always unsatisfactory, and therefore such answers endlessly throw up further problems, thereby initiating an ongoing, never resolved, discourse (Bloch, 1985: 698).

This apparently universal question has led some commentators to suggest that a distinction between nature and culture is present in all human thought, an example of the sort of conceptual dichotomy which Lévi-Strauss argues the human brain constructs as its basic function (1978b: 22-23). A favourite example for Lévi-Strauss is the apparently pan-human activity of cooking which, like the similarly global incest taboo, is nonetheless not entirely necessary to the maintenance of life. This suggests that these may be universal symbols "by which culture is distinguished from nature in order that men might reassure themselves that they are not beasts" (Leach, 1970: 129). Lévi-Strauss stresses that, although we may habitually regard the cultural categories we have constructed as natural facts, this is far from the truth. The order we perceive is largely the material creation of the human spirit:

the contrast of nature and culture would be neither a primeval fact, nor a concrete aspect of universal order. Rather it should be seen as an artificial creation of culture, a protective rampart thrown up around it because it only felt able to assert its uniqueness by destroying all the links that led back to its original association with the other manifestations of life (Lévi-Strauss, 1969: xxix).

Sherry Ortner similarly contends that "We may... broadly equate culture with the notion of human consciousness (i.e., systems of thought and technology), by means of which humanity attempts to assert control over nature" (1982: 490). Others, however, dispute the validity of this broad brush approach, insisting that the terminology of nature and culture is too steeped in the western intellectual tradition to be applied usefully to other cultures, whose systems of thought must be investigated individually on their own terms:

The point to extract is simple: there is no such thing as nature and culture. Each is a highly relativized concept whose ultimate signification must be derived from its place within a specific metaphysics. No single meaning can in fact be given to nature or culture in western thought; there is no consistent dichotomy, only a matrix of contrasts... The question then becomes how large a part of the *total assemblage* of meanings must we be able to identify in other cultures to speak with confidence of their having such notions (Strathern, 1980: 177).

This apparent divergence of opinion, which has blossomed into a full-scale academic debate, may be little more than shadow boxing, since the dispute is largely based on the different individuals' usage of a shared language. The contradictions are



largely illusory, arising from the confusion of observations at different levels of abstraction. To Lévi-Strauss, for example, "nature" and "culture" are simply labels which denote a basic opposition from the operation of human thought, which denotes how the individual member of society perceives a distinction between his or her self, or his or her group, and that which is external or different. In particular circumstances those arbitrary terms might equally be substituted by alternatives such as domestic and wild, male and female, or *x* and *y*, but the structural distinction would still be essentially the same. The meanings that any single society happens to attach to the categories distinguished belong to a lower, less abstract, scale of analysis, in which Lévi-Strauss professes himself to be uninterested. On Lévi-Strauss's terms it is valid to regard the opposition of nature to culture as a human universal.

Strathern's principle interest is, however, in *concepts* of nature and culture. In her analysis, specific to particular cultures, these words must be recognised to be loaded with a panoply of Western meanings whenever they are used to describe any other people's internally conceived cosmology. On this basis it is invalid to suggest the opposition to be universal since, as she in fact demonstrates, the Hagen of Papua New Guinea (for example) clearly do not share many of the same attitudes and beliefs.

A third possibility exists, merging the two positions, which is potentially consistent with both. The opposition between nature and culture can be conceived of as a universal human trait, discernable at every scale from the global down to the individual, distinguished by people's ideology and behaviour towards their environment, but with no *necessary* features. It is fair and useful to discuss this as a global phenomenon, as long as it is clear that however common a particular expression of environmental control, for example, might be, it need not be universal, nor need it have precisely the same meanings in each society in which it occurs. Some cultures may see themselves very much as an integral part of their living world and indulge in only mild expressions of their unique human identity, whilst others may be considerably more antagonistic towards nature. The existence of such differences does not, however, refute the existence of a shared *kind* of opposition (which Lévi-Strauss must ultimately, after all, have deduced from actual social phenomena). As Ortner puts it, "I would maintain that the universality of ritual betokens an assertion in all human cultures of the specifically human ability to act upon and regulate, rather than passively move with and be moved by, the givens of natural existence" (Ortner, 1982: 490).



Postulating the existence of a universal opposition between nature and culture says little about the form of its manifestation in any single society. It is the existence of a perceived difference of any kind which is significant, and which is immediately recognisable as an instance of the overall tendency for human societies to draw some such distinction, even if it cannot be precisely delineated. In Western history, for example, a range of characteristics have been evoked to describe human elevation above the rest of nature:

Even so, there was a marked lack of agreement as to just where man's unique superiority lay. The search for this elusive attribute has been one of the most enduring pursuits of Western philosophers, most of whom have tended to fix on one feature and emphasize it out of all proportion, sometimes to the point of absurdity. Thus man has been described as a political animal (Aristotle); a laughing animal (Thomas Willis); a tool-making animal (Benjamin Franklin); a religious animal (Edmund Burke); and a cooking animal (James Boswell, anticipating Lévi-Strauss)... What all such definitions have in common is that they assume a polarity between the categories 'man' and 'animal' and that they invariably regard the animal as the inferior. In practice, of course, the aim of such definitions has often been less to distinguish men from animals than to propound some ideal of human behaviour, as when Martin Luther in 1530 and Pope Leo XIII in 1891 each declared that the possession of private property was an essential difference between men and beasts (Thomas, 1983: 31).

As Strathern implies, if there were considerable overlap between the matrix of meanings of any particular culture and that of Western society (in so far as it can validly be regarded as a discrete unit) then it would be possible to talk about a shared view of the relationship of nature to culture. If not, the terminology might be misleading if not carefully defined. But potential inaccuracy does not undermine the basic argument. A similar complaint could indeed be levelled at Strathern for her very use of terms such as "western thought" and "other cultures", if her arguments are to be given their full weight. Even though she cautions that terms such as nature and culture have a wide range of meanings at the Western scale, she still accepts the existence of some overall consistency of belief. In fact it is no more, and no less, valid to talk about Western culture, than it would be to talk about global human culture, local culture, or an individual's culture, and at each scale some generalisation is necessary and desirable. It is not necessarily appropriate to criticise analysis at one level of resolution with reference to how terminology is used at a different scale.



WESTERN HISTORY has seen two broad approaches to the question of the status of human culture *vis-à-vis* the rest of nature vie for influence, and it is my contention that this conflict is not restricted to the realm of philosophy but is manifest in behaviour, including, not least, in our food habits. In the following discussion these will be represented as if they were binarily opposed alternatives, which is, of course, only an analytical device; the different positions are better regarded as tendencies on a continuum of possible viewpoints. The first view places the human species in a position of unique and unrivalled supremacy, separate from all other species, with the right — even the divine duty — to exploit the world's resources at our convenience. The second, described in Chapter 7, regards us rather as one particular, indeed special, development of nature but still as a mutually interdependent part of the natural world.

Bullfighting provides a spectacular example of the ostensibly primordial struggle between culture and nature, formalised in ceremonial battle. According to Garry Marvin this Spanish institution survives as a popular arena in which the superiority of human abilities and intelligence over the might of brute nature is ritually demonstrated. "The cultural significance of the *corrida* [bullfight] can be best understood if it is interpreted as an event which both encapsulates and succinctly and dramatically summarizes the important structural oppositions of nature and culture which underlie the idea of what it means to be civilized or truly human as expressed in terms of Andalusian thought" (Marvin, 1988: 128). The entire pageant is constructed to articulate the inevitable victory of brain over brawn, qualities that are regarded as singularly human and animal, respectively. By definition, a good bull must lack human intelligence:

A bull which waits before it charges, which looks from the cape to the body of the man and then back again, is not a bull with *nobleza* but rather it is one with *sentido* (sense or judgement); it appears to be weighing up how to attack. A bull with *sentido* is difficult to perform with, because the *torero* cannot be certain what the animal is going to do. The whole basis of *toreo*, which is that the man deceives the bull, breaks down if the bull attempts to deceive the man as well. A bull with *sentido* is not a good bull because it implies decision and judgement on the part of the animal; qualities which should only apply to men (Marvin, 1988: 103).

The bullfight is, however, just one of the many ways which human societies have devised to maintain and exemplify the perceived superiority of culture over lesser animals. In the Western world, we have consistently represented our environment as a threat to be conquered, a wilderness to be tamed, a resource to be utilised, an object with few intrinsic needs or rights. This ethical position, endemic in the history of our culture,



has come to be something of an ideological imperative, central to religious, academic, scientific, and mythological forms.

To this day, our children are reared on countless fairy tales in which the deep, dark woods are a symbol of untamed danger, full of wicked witches or savage and cunning wolves, waiting to pounce upon the innocent; or stirring tales of brave pioneers venturing into the harsh wilderness to extend the boundaries of civilisation, felling forests to construct log cabins as safe havens from the dangers of the wild, planting crops in the untilled ground and gradually bringing human order where once there was natural chaos. Science fiction, such as the popular American television series *Star Trek*, extends our horizons even beyond the planet to create a vision of a future in which our mission is “to boldly go” to spread a distinctly human civilisation ever wider into the furthest reaches of space — “the final frontier”.

In Western society the “nature-culture dichotomy is so prevalent in contemporary Western thought that we tend to take it for granted without seriously beginning to challenge it” (Birke, 1986: 102). Its influence is accordingly to be found throughout our media of discourse — scientific, religious, philosophical, commercial, and popular alike — though it is perhaps best exemplified by how we put to our use the world’s natural resources, and particularly the flesh of other animals. Nature is regarded as not only other than culture, but contrary to culture. Human society is not only distinct, but distinctly superior.



The material world has traditionally been literally beneath our dignity — a resource for us to use at our will, but towards which we have little obligation, if any, to reciprocate in return for whatever we extract:

Human civilization indeed was virtually synonymous with the conquest of nature. The vegetable world had always been the source of food and fuel; and the West was by this time distinctive for its exceptionally high reliance upon animal resources, whether for labour, for food, for clothing or for transport. The civilization of medieval Europe would have been inconceivable without the ox and the horse. Indeed it has been estimated that the use of animals for draught and burden gave the fifteenth-century European a motor power five times that of his Chinese counterpart. Like the Chinese, the Aztec and Inca societies of America had fewer animals than their European conquerors; it was the Spaniards who introduced horses, cattle, sheep and pigs to the New World. Europeans, moreover, were exceptionally carnivorous by comparison with the vegetable-eating peoples of the East (Thomas, 1983: 25-26).

Arthur Lovejoy suggests that the concept of the Great Chain of Being — a notionally infinite hierarchy of all creation ranging from God at the top, through the angels, to Man, to higher animals, to lower animals, to plants, and to the inanimate — has been “one of the half-dozen most potent and persistent presuppositions in Western thought. It was, in fact, until not much more than a century ago probably the most widely familiar conception of the general *scheme* of things, of the constitutive pattern of the universe; and as such it necessarily predetermined current ideas on many other matters” (Lovejoy, 1936: vii). The central principle, which underpins, for example, commonplace references to higher and lower animals, and the belief that we have mastery over lesser creatures, can be traced back to Aristotle who suggested that:

Plants exist for the sake of animals, and brute beasts for the sake of man — domestic animals for his use and food, wild ones (or at any rate most of them) for food and other accessories of life, such as clothing and various tools.

Since nature makes nothing purposeless or in vain, it is undeniably true that she has made all animals for the sake of man (Aristotle, *Politics*: 16).

Lovejoy charts the progress and influence of the idea through the development of Western history and thought, including the philosophy of Aquinas, Leibniz and Spinoza, the science of Copernicus, Kepler and Bacon, and the art of Milton, Pope, and Victor Hugo. Paradoxically, however, it was in the eighteenth century, when speculative metaphysics



was already waning in favour of triumphant empiricism, that the conception of the universe as a Great Chain of Being reached its widest diffusion and acceptance:

Nonetheless there has been no period in which writers of all sorts — men of science and philosophers, poets and popular essayists, deists and orthodox divines — talked so much about the Chain of Being, or accepted more implicitly the general scheme of ideas connected with it, or more boldly drew from these their latent implications, or apparent implications (Lovejoy, 1936: 183).

The explanation for this incongruity is straightforward. It is that, whilst the scheme notionally testified to the existence and glory of God, its effect was the glorification of humanity, since our median position was supposed to mark the transition from mere sentience to intellectual forms of being (1936: 190). This supported the presupposition that all material things exist for the sake of humans: a proposition vital to the pursuit and accomplishment of the scientific endeavour. Francis Bacon for example, widely celebrated as one of the founding fathers of modern science, pronounced in classical vein that:

Man, if we look to final causes, may be regarded as the centre of the world; insomuch that if man were taken away from the world, the rest would seem to be all astray, without aim or purpose,... and leading to nothing. For the whole world works together in the service of man; and there is nothing from which he does not derive use and fruit... insomuch that all things seem to be going about man's business and not their own (quoted Lovejoy, 1936: 187).

It is apparent then that this philosophical scheme, though no doubt believed by its adherents to have been arrived at by rigorous metaphysical enquiry, reflected and served the wishes of the culture which gave it birth, and nurtured it to maturity. The concept of the Great Chain of Being justified existing attitudes and practices, since society already regarded itself as superior to other forms of creation, and found it advantageous freely to manipulate its animal, vegetable, and mineral resources. Conversely, this exploitation tangibly affirmed our evident difference and natural elevation. Philosophy performed the valuable function of providing intellectual support for the existing orientation.

Religious teaching broadly also subscribed to the same set of values. Peter Singer (1976: 204-5), for example, suggests that in the Bible there is little doubt about our proper relationship with the natural world:

After the Fall of man (for which the Bible holds a woman and an animal responsible), killing animals clearly was permissible. God clothed Adam and



Eve in animal skins before driving them out of the Garden of Eden. Their son Abel was a keeper of sheep and made offerings of his flock to the Lord. Then came the flood, when the rest of creation was nearly wiped out to punish man for his wickedness. When the waters subsided Noah thanked God by making burnt offerings "of every clean beast, and of every clean fowl". In return, God blessed Noah, and gave the final seal to man's dominion:

And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.

And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hands are they delivered.

Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you; even as the green herb have I given you all things [Genesis, 9: 1-3].

Carolyn Merchant suggests that, almost as a self-fulfilling prophecy, the ethic of human supremacy was invoked to justify the steadily increasing power of industrial civilisation. Certainly the expansion of economic activity in the sixteenth century ran parallel to the increasing influence of mechanistic philosophies, perhaps partly due to the potentially restraining effect that older "organic" philosophies could have had on exploitation of the world's physical, animal and human resources (Merchant, 1982). As Keith Thomas (1983) observes:

Today when our ascendancy over nature seems nearly complete, there are plenty of commentators ready to look back with nostalgia at earlier periods when a more even balance obtained. But in the Tudor and Stuart age the characteristic attitude was one of exaltation in hard-won human dominance. Man's dominion over nature was the self-consciously proclaimed ideal of early modern scientists (Thomas, 1983: 28-29).

Notions of the dualism of mind and body and of the mechanistic operation of living things, including the human body, distilled most famously by Descartes but with a considerable intellectual heritage, were eagerly adopted to sanction already rapidly developing technological investigation and exploitation. Meanwhile, Locke's empiricism supported belief in the possibility and value of objectivity — the attitude of regarding everything external to the self as an object — and the need for dispassionate observation (Novak, 1971). Science and technology blossomed in the spirit of detached curiosity, if not outright hostility, with which we became accustomed to view our surroundings, their advances bringing what we learned to regard as civilised benefits, at least for the fortunate, which were immediately interpreted to legitimise and confirm the success of our endeavour and the pre-eminence of our species. Material progress had the additional effect of inducing others to adopt similar ideals so that Western scientific, industrial and commercial values today inflect the thinking and influence the activities of most of the world's population. On many fronts, feeling of involvement and intimacy with the natural



environment was lessening, or, in other words, the conceptual divide between nature and culture was widening.

AS CIVILISED HUMANS, we have long characterised ourselves as predators and conquerors, as opposed to the lower animals which are not, and which we therefore count amongst our resources. We continue to do so, and this notion of human power imbues every avenue of our lives, and our every channel of communication, including — by no means least — the food system. The notion of the Great Chain of Being survives, although today its earthly links have been reformulated in scientific terms as the Food Chain.

5. The notion of nature *consuming us* can shock and amuse





To believe that humans are superior to the rest of creation, and have no duties towards, or responsibility for, the non-human world, has the implicit effect of legitimising meat-eating. Taken to its logical conclusion, this argument predicates that if animals have no rights, no feelings, no true independent existence, then there can be no sense in which it is morally suspect to use them for our own purposes as we see fit. If one accepts the premises without reservation, then cruelty is simply not a relevant concept.

It is thus appropriate that total meat consumption rose rapidly in the early modern period, when the industrial revolution was at its height, and when such views were most clearly and unambiguously expounded, vindicating untrammelled application of the scientific method and of technology and extolling human triumph. Meat was, for the more powerful members of society at least, to be provided in lavish quantities for enjoying to the full. Thomas reports that the seventeenth century philosopher Henry More, for a time "the most zealous defender" of the notion of the Great Chain of Being (Lovejoy, 1936: 125), was sure that cattle and sheep had only been given life in the first place to keep their meat fresh "till we shall have need to eat them" (More, 1655: 116); William King, writing in 1731 on the origin of evil similarly argued that there is no injustice in killing oxen as food for a "more noble animal" since it is only for that that they are given life (King, 1731: 118-119); and when the first efforts were made in England to obtain legal protection for members of other species (regarding bull-baiting), the *Times* newspaper thundered:

Whatever meddles with the private personal disposition of man's time or property is tyranny (25 April 1800).

This early bill was duly defeated. Also around the same time, Pope Pius IX refused to permit the establishment of a society for the prevention of cruelty to animals in Rome, on the grounds that this would imply that human beings have duties towards animals (Turner, 1964: 163). Although society's attitudes have changed sufficiently in the period since to permit a degree of protection for animals from what is regarded as excessive or unnecessary abuse, it is interesting that similar arguments are still used to justify their slaughter and consumption for human food. It is still argued that to consider the interests of other species alongside our own interests would be an unsupportable infringement of human rights, such as when agriculturalists suggest that a "large demand for meat exists in the UK, the EEC, and the world, and is in proportion to per capita income in most countries... To interfere with this demand would be highly controversial. It would be interfering with choice and freedom of action" (Wilson & Lawrence, 1985: 25).



The value of individual freedom in this context should be understood as standing for more than the right of the consumer to eat a particular foodstuff. As the *Times* leader hints through the use of the term “man”, to restrict the manner in which the individual may treat other animals implies far more than its overt content: it constitutes a symbolic — as well as a real — restriction upon how humanity should dispose of the natural environment in general. Meat has long stood for the freedom to exploit. Julia Twigg notes that “Meat was traditionally seen as the food of freemen and not of slaves, and beef in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was popularly regarded as the very basis of English liberties” (Twigg, 1983: 23). And as Moscovici points out, “individualism, together with the individualization of human actions, interest and relationships, tends to stress the contrast between nature and society [and the] individual is now the standard of reference in every sphere, be it physics, biology, economics or philosophy” (1976: 1). To dispute that the individual has unlimited rights over animals is to defy an almost sacred tenet of our common ideology: it is to imply that the power of human culture over nature is limited, and that is indeed controversial in a society in which human supremacy has for so long been a central ethos.



# 6

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## The Power of Meat

In relation to the human organism, the question, What is strength? may seem to be practically the same as the question, What is life? — the greatest question mankind has to consider.

— HEALTH & STRENGTH MAGAZINE, DEC. 1901: 360

THE RELATIONSHIP between meat-eating and belief in human dominion is a two-way interaction. Culture does not merely legitimise meat; the reverse is also true: meat legitimises culture. Consumption of animal flesh provides a direct and powerful authentication of human superiority over the rest of nature, so for individuals and societies to whom such mastery is an important value, its consumption is typically a central symbol. Killing, cooking, and eating animals is perhaps the ultimate expression of human primacy. Meat stands for the power of humanity — Man's proverbial "muscle" — in the natural environment.

It is this significance that gives rise to the unique value of meat in the food systems of so many cultures around the world. It is this symbolic meaning that underpins so much of our behaviour to do with animals and the meat system, in the modern Western world as throughout recorded history. Keith Thomas, for example, comments that:

A reader who came fresh to the moral and theological writings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could be forgiven for inferring that their main purpose was to define the special status of man and to justify his rule



over other creatures... Human civilization indeed was virtually synonymous with the conquest of nature... It was no accident that carving meat at the table was so important a social accomplishment, or that it was associated with a lordly (and distinctly sadistic) vocabulary:

Break that deer;... rear that goose; lift that swan; sauce that chicken; unbrace that mallard; unlace that cony; dismember that heron; display that crain; disfigure that peacock; unjoint that bittern;... mince that plover;... splay that bream;... tame that crab... (Thomas, 1983: 25-27).

Jennifer Stead also finds ample evidence from the eighteenth century to postulate a less sympathetic orientation towards other creatures than is normal today:

In all classes, drunkenness and gambling went together with rough or cruel sports, bespeaking a callousness which was reflected in the cruel treatment of creatures intended for food. Living fish were slashed to make the flesh contract. This was called 'crimping'. Eels were skinned alive, lobsters roasted alive, crammed poultry were sewn up in the guts, turkeys were suspended by the feet and bled to death by the mouth, bulls were baited before slaughter to make the meat more tender, pigs and calves were lashed for the same reason. One of William Kitchiner's recipes begins 'Take a red cock that is not too old and beat him to death'. Towards the end of the century a new sensibility and humanitarian principles caused a growing revulsion against these cruel practices (Stead, 1985: 26).

But such practices, although viewed as cruel from our current perspective, should not be regarded as simply wanton. During that period, when glorification of human power over the rest of nature was in its heyday, it is to be expected that greater ill-treatment of other animals should have been tolerated — and even extolled as necessary to make the meat more enjoyable — than would be the case today. Meat is a venerable symbol of individual and social potency. How we consume it, exchange it, and communicate by using it are all conditioned accordingly, as they may well have been since time immemorial. The Swedish writer Pehr Kalm, for example, considered England different from other countries as butcher's meat formed the greater part of the day's main meal; "I do not believe", he wrote, "that any Englishman who is his own master has ever eaten a dinner without meat" (Kalm, 1748; quoted in Thomas, 1983: 26). Even today, meat can sometimes be seen to convey similar values. It remains, for example, something of a cliché to refer to the hamburger as a symbol of the modern United States:

After nearly 12 years of negotiations, the tastiest symbols of American cultural imperialism are coming to Moscow in the form of McDonald's hamburgers (*Guardian*, 21 Nov. 1987)

The humble hamburger is appropriate as a metaphor for North American culture, since it embodies so many of the multi-faceted ideals on which the society is founded — of individual human potency and freedom, efficiency, and ease. The fast-food



establishment's cherished image of sterile order reassures the patron that its "100% pure beef" product is above suspicion, and its influence today is global: the ubiquitous hamburger restaurant is sited on thoroughfares across the world. It is appropriate that in Britain increased sales in this market should have offset falling sales of red meat elsewhere. In every respect such businesses are the apotheosis of standardised, production-line catering — a fitting food for industrial society. Here beef still enjoys its traditional rôle, amongst consumers whose primary concern is for immediate gratification, rather than for any potential consequences that their purchases may or may not have in terms of animal welfare or environmental damage. As such their sale typifies much industrial behaviour which effectively divorces production and consumption from its ecological context. But the core symbol is the power of the ground beef by which the burger is measured: "quarterpounder", "halfpounder", and so on, and the sense of potency which that endows. Meat is infused with ideas of a special status and strength — ideas by which even Mahatma Gandhi was once influenced:

It began to grow on me that meat-eating was good, that it would make me strong and daring, and that, if the whole country took to meat-eating, the English could be overcome... It was not a question of pleasing the palate. I did not know that it had a particularly good relish... We went in search of a lonely spot by the river, and there I saw, for the first time in my life — meat. There was baker's bread also. I relished neither. The goat's meat was as tough as leather. I simply could not eat it. I was sick and had to leave off eating. I had a very bad night afterwards. A horrible nightmare haunted me. Every time I dropped off to sleep it would seem as though a wild goat were bleating inside me, and I would jump up full of remorse... If my mother and father came to know of my having become a meat-eater, they would be deeply shocked. This knowledge was gnawing at my heart (Gandhi, 1949: 3-4).

Gandhi sought the strength of technology and the intellect, which he saw harnessed to subdue his people, just as it is otherwise brought to bear on the natural world. He made the mistake, however, of believing that it would be by *physically* consuming meat that he might gain the desired force. Meat is a symbol of power, but Gandhi fell into the trap of mistaking the *medium* of expression of a more domineering tradition than his own, with the *instrument* or *source* of that power. In this he was not alone. Like many peoples around the world who think that by consuming a physical substance one can somehow partake of its soul (see Chapter 12), we too seem to believe that only meat can endow us with a particular sort of vitality. It may be no coincidence that it is the muscle flesh of other animals that we most favour as the source of strength for ourselves since, metaphorically, it is the animal's strength that we consume. This provides an explanation for our valuation of "better" cuts of meat that nutrition or crude economic logic cannot, for as Sahlins points out, "The social value of steak or roast, as compared with



tripe or tongue, would be difficult to defend. Moreover, steak remains the most expensive meat even though its absolute supply is much greater than that of tongue; there is much more steak to the cow than there is tongue" (Sahlins, 1976: 176). It is steak that constitutes the astronauts' ritual pre-flight meal (Twigg, 1983: 23), as if a final affirmation of human control over the planet with which their link is soon to become so tenuous. Meat satisfies our bodies, but it also satisfies our minds. We not only eat the animal's flesh, but with it we drain their lifeblood, and so absorb their strength.

THE MOTIF OF BLOOD is absolutely central to the meat system. Indeed, it appears, through the association of blood with the colour red it is fundamental to much human thought. Berlin & Kay's cross-cultural enquiry into "Basic Color Terms" discovered that all languages have terms for black and for white, or at least dark and light, but that if a language contains three terms then the third will be for red. It seems, they argue, that red is regularly the first true colour term to emerge as complex language develops (Berlin & Kay, 1969).

Around the world, red serves to suggest ideas of danger, violence, or revolution. Red is the colour of aggression, of power, of anger, of warning. It stands out and attracts our attention — hence its ubiquitous use in shop decoration and advertising and on fire alarms. As Edmund Leach notes of the oppositions we draw between red and other colours:

When we make paired oppositions of this kind, red is consistently given the same value, it is treated as a danger sign: hot taps, live electric wires, debit entries on account books, stop signs on roads and railways. This is a pattern which turns up in many other cultures besides our own and in these other cases there is often a quite explicit recognition that the 'danger' of red derives from its 'natural' association with blood (Leach, 1974: 22).

Blood's symbolic significance is indeed widespread. We have traditionally seen blood as the stream of life itself — since when too much spills out then life comes to an end. We faint at the sight of it. We imply guilt by saying that we have blood on our hands — a spot of which Lady Macbeth found impossible to remove as she was driven mad. It signifies kinship: as in blood brotherhood, noble blood, or blood feud. It is used as the arbiter of inheritance, as when we talk of blood lineage, or say that some attribute is in the blood. The upper classes of British society are known as blue-blooded. The implication is that the more powerful members of society are so civilised as to symbolically elevated above mere mortality, no longer to be characterised by that most



natural sign of red blood. Red meat might be suitable as food for such individuals, but is apparently not felt to be an appropriate conception of their own physiology.

At Christian communion we drink the blood of Christ, to form a mystical bond in which we partake of the Holy Spirit. In our horror stories, characters such as Dracula drink the blood of living people, to drain them of their life force to his own ends. Blood is also the source of our passion — to be hot blooded is to be wild, spirited, lusty, impulsive; to be cold blooded is to be cruel, calculating, inhuman — and a recurrent theme suggests a widespread belief that by consuming the blood of another being, we can absorb something of its very essence. The concept of lifeblood is evident throughout our culture, either directly or by implication through association with the colour red. It is the so-called red meats, in which the blood is most vividly evident, which have traditionally been held in highest esteem in Western society. It is red meats which today are most regularly regarded as unhealthy in excess. It is also red meats which have been most zealously rejected by vegetarians.

#### 6. The red colour of blood is closely identified with meat



Significantly, the image of red-coloured fruit and vegetables such as tomatoes or red apples seems to be largely unaffected by this association, possibly since by being categorically opposed to meat in the food system the link between their pigment and that of blood carries little meaning. Red wine, however, does have something of the same reputation, upon which some "full-bodied" brands such as *Bull's blood* deliberately play.



It may even be significant that at the same time as there has been a move from red to white meats, since the 1960s the British have switched "from drinking mostly red wine to drinking two thirds of our wine white" (Barr, 1989: 49) as part of a general move towards so-called lighter alcoholic drinks. But it is red meat which remains the archetype of everything that meat stands for:

The concept of blood as the river of life continues to exert a hold even today. It is a force that no vegetarian should underestimate. It surely underlies the general disinclination of the average housewife to provide her family with soya protein instead of chunks of stewing: no amount of arguing about the nutritional sufficiency of soya products, it seems, can overcome this residual unconscious belief in blood... Vegetarians, therefore, are people who have somehow conquered this mythopoeic belief in the regenerative power of blood... Blood is the very stuff of life and meat partakes of its qualities and of its mythical and psychological associations. Sometimes no amount of factual evidence or moral exhortations can conquer this primordial logic (Cox & Crockett, 1979: 18-19).

The apparent desire to define the special, elevated, status of the human species above all others is by no means true only of the past. Meat remains a graphic vehicle through which these values are widely communicated, and the concept of blood is central to its efficacy. Today ideas associated with human power, control, and natural instinct, still imbue our thinking on meat in all sorts of ways. Cross-references between meat eating and such attributes as civilisation, strength and power, ease and convenience, prestige, affluence, mental and physical wellbeing, potency, and skill are routine, indeed endemic, in the systems of belief, thought and action relating to meat, the common thread to each case being the notion of human power over the natural environment and the benefits with which that civilised status reputedly endows us.

The remainder of this chapter will describe some of the ways in which the symbolic value of human omnipotence, sometimes expressed in terms of civilised standards, pervades the different stages of meat provision and consumption: namely hunting; farming, breeding, and slaughter; marketing and retailing; and processing and cooking.



## Hunting

Businessmen are to be taught how to trap, skin and cook wild animals on a four day survival course in West Perthshire... designed to boost their powers of leadership and initiative, and make them more self-confident (*Daily Telegraph*, 8 Feb 1988).

Inside all nature, since Adam was a boy, there has been an awful, awesome natural cruelty that we should not challenge. Some are made to hunt, some to run. God made the deer to run away — big wide ears, pop eyes for marvellously acute vision, superb smell, and the long, long powerful legs of one of the supreme athletes of the animal world (Local vet to the D & S hunt, George Carter. *Guardian*, 27 Dec 1988: 17).

...at the Great Exhibition of 1851, a booth displayed monkey skins from Africa. It was painful, wrote a sensitive contemporary, to think of the suffering the creatures must have undergone. But there was a silver lining: 'the work of catching these monkeys is civilising the African' (Thomas, 1983: 30).

THROUGH HUNTING, we fulfil ostensibly rational, functional objectives, but we do so in a way that confirms our sense of prowess. Undoubtedly a case can be made for the utility of hunting in many ways: hunting can provide sustenance; it can reduce competition for food; it can dispatch animals that might threaten our safety; it is even argued that hunting can provide an intensive training ground in the art and science of warfare. These are the practical reasons, but they cannot adequately explain the importance of the pursuit as an essentially recreational activity in modern societies. Hunting for the pleasure of the pursuit is almost unknown in tribal peoples, suggesting that it is largely a recent, Western phenomenon. Tim Ingold describes, for example, the very different view of the hunt held in reindeer-hunting circumboreal societies:

Whatever the variations, whose roots lie in both historical and environmental conditions, one common problem seems to worry all the peoples with whom we are concerned. It is that whilst life depends on the harmonious integration of the various components or levels of being, this can only be achieved at one locus by breaking things up at another. Thus, the hunter lives by killing and eating animals, which inevitably entails their dismemberment. Much of the ritual surrounding the treatment of slaughtered beasts, particularly concerning the careful preservation of bones and other inedible parts, and their deposition in the correct medium and in the precise order that they occur in the skeleton, is designed to assist the reconstitution of the animals from the pieces into which they have been broken for the purposes of consumption, thus ensuring the regeneration of that on which human life depends... Above all, nothing should be wasted, for this would



indicate a casually destructive attitude to nature which would only offend the animal guardians (Ingold, 1986: 246-7).

Functional explanations for the modern Western institution cannot explain, for example, why hunting is extensively invoked, from all the attributes conceivable, to characterise the early stages in human evolution; nor why hunting is the ritualistic endeavour, imbued with symbolism, that it remains. To understand the prestige and popularity of the pursuit, it is necessary to realise that in Britain in particular, blood sports have generally been the preserve of the powerful, who characteristically regard their activity as part of the natural order of things. Indeed H.R.H. The Duke of Edinburgh is reported to have said that "It is undeniable that grouse are in no danger whatsoever from those who shoot grouse" (*Guardian*, 27 Dec 1988: 17). Even in the Dark Ages, the aristocracy of the remnants of the Western Empire were frequently more interested in hunting than in agriculture:

...wild boar and stag were their main quarry, passionately pursued. Vast tracts of woodland were assigned to the chase; red deer were hunted with staghounds, buckhounds pursued fallow deer. Venison, doubly prized when cattle were small and scraggy, and delicious when properly hung, became a mainstay of itinerant royal and princely households (Bowler, 1979: 149).

Marion Shoard writes that so intense was William of Normandy's passion for hunting that "most of Essex, Sussex, Surrey, Hampshire, large stretches of the north and west and parts of Scotland and Wales were declared royal forest", effectively prohibiting its use for food production for the rest of the population since a special forest law obtained under which the needs of the quarry overrode those of mere non-aristocratic humans:

It is impossible to establish the precise extent of the royal forests in William's day, but it is clear that almost a quarter of England was royal forest during the reign of Henry II in the mid-twelfth century; and that by the thirteenth century, after a period of decline, they still covered about one-fifth of the land surface of England (Shoard, 1987: 37-38).

Ever since, hunting in Britain has been an largely élitist pursuit, limited to those with the money or connections required to gain access to the land, and defended from poaching under threat of dire penalties. Deer stalking especially has long been beyond the means of most, including, today, many landowners:

Gone, in most cases, are the owners or tenants who can still afford to stalk their ground purely for their own pleasure and to entertain their friends. Letting by the week or by the day is commonplace. The day tenant... has paid his £100 — £150 for his day's stalking, not expensive compared to the £40 a day of 100 years ago, and he wants his money's worth (Bowser, 1986: 23)



In other European countries with, perhaps, a more egalitarian tradition, hunting for sport has been less confined to the more powerful classes in society — indeed in recent years the sheer scale of shooting of migratory birds in the Mediterranean region has aroused concern at the threat of widespread extinctions. However, although the practice may have a wider social base, it is much the same ideology which nonetheless obtains. Hunting remains an expression of human dominion over nature, exercised and expressed through the media of individual skill and cultural technology.

THE AFFIRMATIVE NATURE OF HUNTING, testifying to the glory of the human spirit, may explain why we continue to hunt for pleasure when it is no longer necessary for survival. Hunting reifies belief in the innate advantage of superior human skills. As Veblen noted some years ago, the insistence by those who hunt for sport that their motivation is a noble one, and their reluctance to acknowledge baser reasons, is suggestive in itself:

A further feature in which sports differ from the duel and similar disturbances of the peace is the peculiarity that they admit of other motives being assigned for them besides the impulses of exploit and ferocity. There is probably little if any other motive present in any given case, but the fact that other reasons for indulging in sports are frequently assigned goes to say that other grounds are sometimes present in a subsidiary way. Sportsmen — hunters and anglers — are more or less in a habit of assigning a love of nature, the need of recreation, and the like, as the incentives to their favourite passtime. These motives are no doubt frequently present and make up a part of the attractiveness of the sportsmen's life; but these can not be the chief incentives. These ostensible needs could be more readily and fully satisfied without the accompaniment of a systematic effort to take the life of those creatures that make up an essential feature of that 'nature' that is beloved by the sportsman. It is, indeed, the most noticeable effect of the sportsman's activity to keep nature in a state of chronic desolation by killing off all living things whose destruction he can compass (Veblen, 1899: 257).

Although awareness of an economic opportunity has brought about the advent of deer farming in Britain in recent years, hunting has generally been reserved for those species that are not normally domesticated, and for those not even eaten. The fact that we do not tend to eat carnivores, for example, by no means implies that such animals should not be killed — far from it. The walls of many an ancestral pile, or dilapidated country hotel, display the big game trophies which hang to testify to the courage and skill, and to the wealth and social position, of the conquerors... or by association of the building's



current occupiers. In such environments are exhibited the corpses of those creatures which *are not* farmed or normally regarded as food; to stuff and mount the head of a year-old lamb or a pig or a cow would be regarded as peculiar to the point of tastelessness.

The overt display of human mastery embodied in such relics is not, however, to everybody's taste. A symbolism that originates in a particular social group at a particular time does not necessarily translate into another context. Thus, amongst a group of non-aristocratic young people, who enjoy eating meat but who prefer not to think too directly about its origins, the meanings communicated are not received so positively:

*... there was a whole bunch of us who'd been in the wine bar all evening, but we just had to make a move after a while. That was when we went to this new place that had just opened nearby. It was amazing: trying to do the full American bit — it even had a life size cowboy at the door who spoke when you pushed a button on his nose. We fancied a bite to eat, and ordered these amazing American style burgers they were doing. But the place we were sitting, at the back, was, like, lined with animal skins on the walls. I mean there was hardly any wall visible. And it just... it's not the sort of thing you want when you're just tucking into a hamburger. It was really horrible. So when the owner came along we sort of started to lay into him for his lack of taste! You know: "don't you know that dead animals aren't cool any longer"! I think he was really put out because he'd obviously just put an enormous effort into putting this place together and was really proud of it, and here was almost his first customers telling him that it was really gruesome. But, I mean, you just don't want to be reminded like that when you're eating, do you?*

The traditionally unique prestige of big game in particular derives from its very non-utility as meat. Certainly, for most people, ordinary meat is prestigious relative to other foods, but it can be consumed, and its symbolic meaning therefore transacted, by almost anyone. To successfully hunt and kill a "big cat", however, or an elephant, a bear, or a moose, cannot be confused with that level of mundane consumption. The ultimate trophy to hang on the wall for all to see as conquered is surely the lion. We give it the accolade of King of the Beasts, as if to say that even the most regal, the most powerful, the most feared of creatures, is no match for us. It is no accident that we lay the skins of powerful lions, tigers and bears on the floor as rugs, literally and symbolically to be walked all over.

Bagging so-called big game animals is unmistakably the sign of a person who has the time and money to hunt for the pleasure of it, and it is in this context that the carnivores and other powerful and elusive beasts are viewed as in a class of their own. It is entirely consistent with the centrality of meat as a symbol of human power that the hunting of such animals should have become a pursuit associated with, and often reserved



largely for, the most privileged and powerful in society. Control and exploitation of natural resources have thus been structurally analogous to control of human resources.

Fox hunting, similarly, enables the few active participants ritually to display their sovereignty in pursuing a reputedly intelligent animal to its death. But that is not all; the hunt simultaneously demonstrates their mastery of the horse they ride, the hounds they command, and — not least — the servants or workers in their employ, and even over the rest of the society who do not command the financial or social access to such pursuits (should they wish it). For, as Veblen notes of just this context, “In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence” (Veblen, 1899: 36). Meanwhile the many camp-followers, normally self-selected from the more powerful members of society, can ceremonially bathe in the reflected glory. Their nominal participation in the rout of their prey is ritually affirmed in the custom of “blooding” in which novice hunters are daubed with the blood of the captured quarry — the symbol of its life and spirit.

It is interesting that fishing should be the form of hunting in which the greatest numbers participate. It is indeed the most popular participation sport in Britain. Again, it is the element of skill that is most valued, and the element of challenge that is most glorified. Max Hastings, editor of the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper, for example, intriguingly describes trout fishing in such a way as to combine the ethic of competitive mastery with a flourish of sexist imagery:

I would rather go home empty-handed after a day playing a dry fly than catch monsters with a deep-sunk lure dressed like a saloon-bar slut (*Independent*, 6 May 1989: 16).

That fishing should be less exclusive an activity than hunting for red-blooded land animals is appropriate since, in most other respects too, fish are conventionally regarded as only semi-animal: commonly less avoided by vegetarians, and less esteemed by keen meat-eaters. It is fitting that the pursuit of a generally less highly regarded, and symbolically less powerful, creature should also accrue less prestige. Only the largest and strongest of fish, such as the salmon in Scotland, or the shark in the Americas, rival land animals for the resistance they put up, and so for the perceived challenge to be met and overcome. Accordingly only these creatures are reputed to endow those who catch them with comparable prestige. The largest are stuffed and mounted, just as the heads of game beasts are displayed on walls, exhibited in glass show-cases for all to pay homage — not



so much to the mighty fish, but rather to the captor whose name is immortalised on a discrete brass plate.

HUMAN SKILL IS EXTOLLED throughout the meat-system, but particularly in the context of hunting. It is a key value, metaphorically representing human ability, elevation, civilisation, and achievement. This is not to dispute that highly developed skills may be admirable qualities in any context, nor that the input of skilled labour by necessity adds economic value to a product. Its association with meat, however, conveys more than the obvious, and the notion occurs with disproportionate regularity in contexts to do with animal resource management. This can be illustrated by the case of deer hunting.

Enthusiasts are wont to present deer hunting, inspirationally, as a noble pursuit standing for elemental human tradition. Discourses on the topic are conventionally littered with references to the gamut of civilised virtues. The (aristocratic) president of the British Deer Society, for example, writes:

A little reminiscence of long ago — my first encounter with the red deer was when I was aged about three or four and living down at Dulverton. While being taken for a walk in an old oak wood we came upon 20 or 30 red deer stags among the trees with heads held high and on the alert, looking most impressive and beautiful. That was where my love of deer started so many years ago and has never deserted me... It was well over 50 years ago that I stalked and shot my first Highland stag and that I mention because there have been very many changes affecting deer and the stalking of them in the years which have elapsed. Our equipment is very different. In those days it was considered rather unsporting to use an optical or telescopic sight. Practically nobody did except the old and the infirm. Now it has been accepted that, provided we do not use the telescopic sight for taking too long or too risky shots, anything that helps towards a clean kill with the very first shot the better... There are still a few people who complain that it is downright cruel to shoot deer but we are trying to spread the message even among them that it is necessitous for deer populations to be kept under control for their own good and if they are not to do serious damage (Lord Dulverton, 1986: 5).

Far from being cruel, human control exercised in the form of deer hunting is portrayed as a form of appreciation of beauty, and in the animals' own interests as well as in our own. It is as if we, as higher beings, must accept the responsibility of dominion, and order the world according to our grand design — so long as we do so with the same sort of love and respect that we believe God to show unto ourselves. The British Red Deer Commission, for example, has a remit "to study both the conservation and the control of



deer" (Dulverton, 1986: 5). Control is a term repeatedly encountered in such contexts, indicating what is seen as the correct relationship between humans and the other animals concerned.

The concern expressed about the sportiness of high technology weaponry is interesting. In recent history, hunting has not been primarily a pastime whereby we commune as one with nature, nor whereby we feed ourselves, although that may be the preferred imagery projected. The venison resulting from Victorian sporting hunts, for instance:

was of little value; much of it was consumed in the Lodge. I suspect the staff became heartily sick of it. Some would be given to friends. The local Doctor, the Minister, and some of the employees would get their share and, no doubt, the dogs lived well (Bowser, 1986: 23).

Rather, through hunting we demonstrate our ability to control the wild — normally through the use of cultural artifacts such as traps and rifles, of which the kill is an integral component. A curious piece of evidence is provided by a British television advertisement from 1988 promoting a chewy cereal snack bar called *Tracker*. In keeping with the name, the film portrays a man dressed up for hunting, tracking a deer through the countryside. After some time he reaches a position where he has it clearly in his sights — but it is revealed that his purpose is to shoot his quarry with a camera, not a gun. He then relaxes and enjoys his chewy cereal bar. The symbolism is clear. This (evidently cultured) man prefers to preserve nature, and appreciate its living beauty, without having to injure it. A bar made from natural cereal, implicitly opposed to the meat which he is shown to shun by sparing the deer, is therefore his obvious choice. (The camera has similarly superseded the rifle as the equipment of latter-day big-game safaris, since less kudos came to be attached to the creatures' actual destruction as some became endangered, and others extinct).

In the field of so-called blood sports, however, enjoyment is derived from the meeting and overcoming of the challenge of brute nature, normally climaxing in the death of the quarry. As Garry Marvin puts it, the hunt "is a balance between the animal having the ability to use its instinct and physical ability to escape and the human being attempting, by skill and intelligence, to prevent this happening" (Marvin, 1988: 132). Hunting is an affirmation of the superiority of our technology and civilised skills *over* the wilderness, not an expression of our part in it. But it originated at a time when relatively simple weaponry such as the longbow was the height of hunting technology. It is



appropriate therefore that, with the increasing sophistication of equipment available, some should have doubts about whether the contest is still fair game, as indicated by Lord Dulverton, as well as by the secretary of a Deer Management Group:

The Victorians' idea of sport was such that many favoured the solid bullet, as it had to be placed more accurately to ensure that the beast was killed. Likewise, the telescopic sight was frowned upon. To quote Augustus Grumble, 'If the quarry will only keep still, it is apparently brought up almost within touch of the muzzle of the rifle and missing becomes nearly impossible. All the difficulties of judging distance, all the nicety of taking the sight in a bad light, all the pleasure in fact of making a brilliant shot with an ordinary rifle is done away with' (Bowser, 1986: 22).

When the element of skill directly required of the individual hunter is so diminished by the aid of technology that the animal is seen to have little chance in the contest, it is proportionately less of a personal achievement to kill, so less prestige accrues. Whereas in the past hunting was principally an individual achievement with the assistance of cultural technology, today it has become increasingly a demonstration of the power of human technology through the agency of the particular hunter. Thus in Michael Cimino's film of *The Deer Hunter* (1978), Mike (De Niro's lead character) lays obsessive emphasis on hunting alone, and on killing with "one shot":

Two is pussy... You have to think about one shot. One shot is what it's all about. One shot. I try to tell people that; they don't listen.

Killing with a single shot is, for Mike (representing the rugged, individualistic, American ideal), the only way to find real challenge; his partner, Nick (Christopher Walken), responds by branding him a "control freak". In modern British deer hunting idiom, conversely, the dilemma of increasing sophistication of weaponry reducing the scope for individual skill is resolved by stressing the social rather than the individual value of the hunt, so that the technology is rendered acceptable rather than rejected. Deer populations are controlled "for their own good" and to reduce damage to human resources, so they are to be killed "cleanly" and efficiently. The ideal of sportsmanship, as justification for the kill, has been increasingly sublimated to social duty. Some hunting people insist that this is their only purpose, but others will agree that the challenge is their ultimate delight:

"We are the conservationists," insists Diana Scott, a joint Master of the Devon and Somerset. "We hunt to preserve the deer, to keep the herds healthy; you have to be a countryman to understand our pride at being custodians of red deer, not destroyers..."

I'm sorry but [the critics] are simply and totally misinformed. Without the D&S, quite simply, the red deer of Exmoor would wither and die. We love the



deer, they're the very symbol of Exmoor. But, lovely as they are, they do damage, they break up plantations and hedgerows, eat fresh spring grass before lambing and so on — but are tolerated by us farmers as long as we have the right to manage them.

Hunting, from time immemorial, has been crucial in dispersing the herds, moving the stags around at rutting time so they don't keep serving the same hinds, or getting off with their daughters; interbreeding can stress and weaken a herd in no time. You have got to think of hunting as a replacement for the predator wolf when deer were really in the wild, not all that long ago comparatively" (Keating, 1988: 17).

...in the last analysis, what is it that draws us, even when we are becoming feeble of foot and rheumatic of shoulder, to struggle up the hill once more to puff and pant round the tops, crawl through peat hags and bogs and having, one hopes, seen a nice Royal or two, perhaps even a thirteen pointer, to shoot that nasty old switch? Whatever the Antis, of whatever fringe may think, it is not the lust to kill — certainly not. It is because we still enjoy the challenge — masochists that we are — because we love the high places and first, foremost and above all, because we love the dun red deer (Bowser, 1986: 24).

## Farming, Breeding, & Slaughter

AS IN THE CONTEXT OF HUNTING, human skill is highly valued in the breeding and rearing of animals. An instructive example of this viewpoint comes from an informant on the "improvement" of animals:

*I had a passionate argument, when we were abroad once, with a farmer who said that this kept up the standards. The animals are so much better than they were 50 years ago... because of the standards at shows and everything... And if you look at the pictures of animals 100 years ago then they are definitely... they probably are improving them... It was he who was arguing that they had brought up the standard of meat... well, farmers had brought up the standard of cattle and sheep and everything. According to him, if there were no meat eaters there would be no reason to keep those standards up. That's what they always say about horse racing too: that if there was no gambling they wouldn't have the tremendous bloodstock that they have.*

This anthropocentric and circular argument implies that the application of human skill is in some way for the benefit of the animals themselves, much as deer hunting is held to be for the animals' own good, when in fact the improvements are clearly assessed entirely from the point of view of usefulness to humans. It is of scant use to a turkey, bred for copious quantities of body flesh, that it can breed only by artificial insemination; nor is it greatly advantageous to a thoroughbred racehorse to be able to sprint along carefully



flattened race-courses, when in any natural setting its fragile limbs would be liable to fracture. The improvement brought about through skilled breeding is in the animals' adaptation not to a natural ecological niche (wild turkey, wild horse) but to the categories — the economic niches — to which our culture assigns them (battery turkey, racehorse). We arrogate to ourselves divine power, not only of life and death, but of evolution and destiny itself:

In the eighteenth century it was widely urged that domestication was *good* for animals; it civilized them and increased their numbers; 'we multiply life, sensation and enjoyment'. Cows and sheep were better off in man's care than left to the mercy of wild predators. To butcher them for meat might seem cruel, said Thomas Robinson in 1709, but, 'when more closely enquired into,' it proved 'a kindness, rather than cruelty'; their despatch was quick and they were spared the sufferings of old age (Thomas, 1983: 20-21).

The latest manifestation of this drive towards the so-called improvement of nature is the appropriately named science of bio-engineering, which seeks finally to wrest control over the form and future direction of the planet's ecology from the assumedly haphazard ordinance of mutation and natural selection, in order to engineer the technologist's blueprint more efficiently. In classic Cartesian tradition, the biotechnologist relegates sentient creatures to the status of mere machines. Only the terminology has been updated to the sophisticated twentieth century, so that the analogy is no longer the springs and mechanics of clocks as described by Descartes. Instead, the jargon of "genetic programming" conjures up images of computers which, despite their deceptive ability to seem almost intelligent, in truth are entirely inanimate. As usual we justify the quest for advance with recourse to economic criteria and ultimate advantage to human welfare. But as usual our performance of such technological feats simultaneously demonstrates our ability to control the uncontrolled, as if we simply cannot tolerate the notion that we are not, in the end, absolute monarchs of all we survey.

Francis Klingender, analysing the treatment of animals in art and in thought up to the end of the Middle Ages, detects a basic conflict inherent in our approach to nature. He argues that the daily work of hunters, trappers and fishermen; stockbreeders, cattlemen, shepherds and butchers; rat-catchers and those who fight insect pests; trainers of horses, dogs and other creatures that work for man — all these activities, and many others like them, represent one aspect of the relationship between men and animals. The companionable relationship with birds and beasts enjoyed by children and adults, the poet's delight in the song and movements of birds, or the beauty that artists perceive in animals, represent an opposing view:

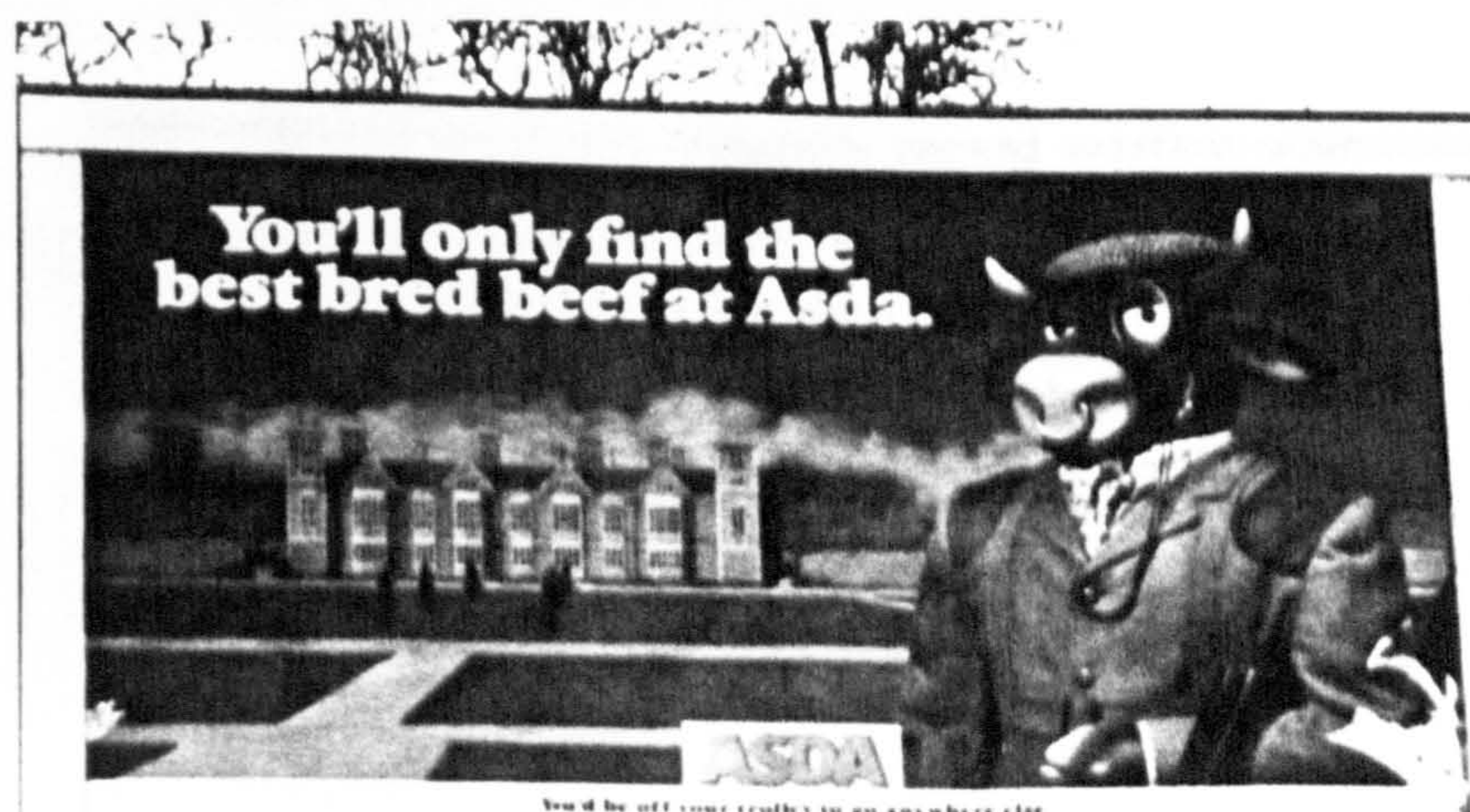


In these contrasting attitudes we encounter... a dilemma... rooted in the relentless struggle between man and beast... Although today we breed animals for meat, we still prey on them and the struggle continues, even in our hatreds are now chiefly confined to pests and microbes (Klingender, 1971: xxv).

It is appropriate that biotechnology and microbiology should be amongst the most competitive, profitable, and prestigious scientific pursuits of the late twentieth century. At one time it was the higher animals that most resisted our control, and threatened or challenged us, and so which were the highest status objects of consumption. But today we have achieved more or less total power over the activities of such creatures, to the extent that we have wiped many from the face of the earth. Our power over insects, microbes, or viruses is, however, less complete, just as our mastery of the genetic makeup of those higher animals which remain is still only partial. It is these creatures, therefore, that today are represented either as the greatest threat to human health or as the greatest opportunity for what is called advance: the achievement of further control. Research at such microscopic levels of resolution is currently perceived to be a potentially vast source of financial profit. It is therefore towards the challenge of understanding genetic coding or microbial biology that we devote much research effort, and it is upon those who effect advances in the chemical, biological, or microbiological endeavours upon whom we endow high status.

FARMING, IN BRITAIN, is still closely associated with landowning, which traditionally has been the preserve of the powerful and well-bred. A variety of social and economic factors lie behind this, but control of large numbers of animals is clearly one component.

7. The aristocratic traditions of landowning support meat's prestigious image





Farmers typically take considerable pride in regarding themselves as custodians of the resource of land, managing it responsibly to yield the greatest returns to the human population. Land, and its animal or vegetable stock, has traditionally been regarded as a raw material to be manipulated through the devices of human science, with the aim of maintaining the greatest possible degree of control over production. Through such skill is gained a reliable consistency in the quality of the product which is not achievable by less accomplished systems of food provision:

*Okay, you can have things pulled out of the polluted sea to eat, but, as they say, there's no way of monitoring what the hell you're eating there. But we have very strict controls on our kills. Every slaughter house has to have a vet, and any time that an animal's killed he has to go and check on a few parts, and anything slightly, you know, not looking right, and that animal's generally pulled away and given a thorough test.*

A progressive tendency towards control through standardisation has found its ultimate expression in monocultural systems in which a single crop is maintained over vast tracts of land in the name of production efficiency. Any floral or faunal intruders are identified as pests and subdued by technological responses such as applications of chemical pesticides. Modern agriculture has taken the struggle for control so far that its fields are viewed almost literally as battlefields, in which any element that is not part of the human design is regarded as the enemy, as illustrated by an agricultural chemicals company's advertising:

#### **MORE FOOD?**

**Here's how Monsanto is pressing the attack**

Technical research resembles a battle. The most effective attack is based on a survey of the situation, picks and objective, maps a strategy, then carries it out. In the world-wide battle to provide more food, Monsanto researchers have done just this...

#### **Big Gun in the Battle**

Most recently, Monsanto's attack on weed-losses put a heavy gun in the field. This molecule is *N-(phosphonomethyl)glycine*. Unlike the arsenal of selective herbicides — this compound is *totally* phytotoxic. It annihilates to the roots... (*Scientific American*, 253 (3), 1976: 124).

Exponents of this point of view typically regard warfare with nature as an honourable duty and final victory as an achievable objective. Science and technology — as manifestations of human intelligence — are the keys to total control. It is in this spirit that intensive systems of rearing livestock have been developed. In these engineered environments all variables are carefully monitored, including ambient temperature, the creatures' nutrient intake, and even genetic make up. Drugs and surgical procedures such as castration and de-beaking are administered to minimise natural variation, and to



maximise desired traits such as rapid growth. Every aspect of the animals' lives and deaths are controlled to the greatest possible extent. And less meticulous systems of production can be duly denigrated for their lack of responsibility as this farmer reveals:

*I disagree sometimes with the way that fishing goes on, because you know that we here are actually farming something: we know numbers. We're working on basic numbers. We have a breeding unit and... But people that fish in the seas — they're promoting it like mad on the television: to eat fish is healthy for you, but, you know, they're not doing the system any good at all. The sea is basically just being plundered, and no one is really putting any of that money back into the system, whereas on our farming systems, we spend back into the unit. It's not farming. There it's just — the biggest boat, the smallest nets you can get etcetera, and just pull out as much from the sea as possible. And they don't give two hoots about it. They just go on every single day. They're making a lot of money out of it at the moment.*

An image of our responsible stewardship of nature exists at the heart of the farming ethic, which conditions our view of the duty to manage the entire natural system. Even in our humour the same notions of superiority, control, and sometimes threat, are implicit:

Bernie Winters, in Dick Whittington at the Alexandra Theatre, Birmingham, giggled: "Naughty Schnorbitz. She's been worrying sheep. Goes up to them and whispers 'mint sauce' in their ears!" (*Sunday Mirror*, 20. Dec. 1987).

AS WITH HUNTING, AND FARMING, so at the stage of slaughter the general motif of human domination of animals is once again to be found. In the headlines of a recent advertisements for "Speed" butchery equipment, for example, similar imagery sustains the message:

ONLY SPEED HAS THE STRENGTH  
TO CUT HUNDREDS OF BEASTS DOWN TO SIZE  
(*Butcher & Processor*, Nov. 1987: 20)

It is rare today, in general discourse, for pleasure in the slaughter or butchery of meat to be expressed openly and clearly. Just as contemporary hunters justify their pursuit with reference to the necessity to manage wildlife, and perhaps the sociability of the hunt, we tend instead to justify our carnivorous inclinations with established nutritional or even environmental reasons for eating the meat which farmers rear on our behalf. Meat is effectively distanced from the unfortunate necessity of killing. At slaughter we pay others to carry out a task from which most of us would shrink if confronted, and banish



their activity to marginal sites safely removed from our normal lives. The low-status afforded to slaughterhouse operatives in our social pecking order reflects our common distaste for a process which we nonetheless mandate through consumer demand. To those who do experience slaughter at first hand it is commonly seen as a necessary aspect of the process of rearing animals whose inherent unpleasantness is sanitised by technological procedures:

*I'd be taking my animals there and... you know, you can't help but feel a bit of sadness when you take along animals that you've reared from birth, and even nursed and things, to... well, basically to have them killed. But then you'd hand them over to these guys and you'd see that for them it was just a job of work... and they'd lost any sensitivity — if they ever had any — to the fact that these were living, breathing, creatures. After a while I really started to hate them for that, even though I knew it was very very hypocritical because even if I was allowed to kill them myself, I wouldn't be very keen on doing so.*

Q. Do you ever go to slaughterhouses?

*Yes, quite often. It's not as... it's very clean, you know... very clinical. It's humanely killed, hoisted up, and literally within minutes they have the skin and everything away from the animal. It soon becomes part of a routine job; it's a bit of a factory system.*

To others, however, there is no shame in the process of producing and consuming meat, and sheer hedonism can still justify the honest delight:

On my way to work, I walk through Smithfields... In the corridors, gently swinging carcasses hang and men busily heave plastic sacks of meat along, pausing only to push back in a protruding bone or two...

Smithfields must surely rank high on the vegetarian's list of horror spots. I, however, have a fondness for the place. I like the buzz of bargaining, the eerie shadows, barrows, scales, and even the macabre shapes of the pinky bodies lanced by vicious-looking hooks. George Grosz should have painted it.

Mind you, I do have my limits. Smithfields is strictly after breakfast viewing...

My friends were quite horrified when I mentioned my delight in the sights and sounds of Smithfields. Their reaction reminded me of something of which I was previously only vaguely aware: that as a committed carnivore I am fast becoming an endangered species...

For me, food is connected with ideas of nurture, indulgence, pleasure. I go in for the straightforward hedonism of cream, butter, wine, meat and garlic... This week I'm holding a Smithfields-style feast... There'll be Venetian roast duck, pheasant in cream, chicken tikka, boeuf a la bourguignonne and stuffed shoulder of lamb on the menu... Everyone's invited but I don't expect too many acceptances. Who can afford to be seen at a banquet like mine? (Rebecca Hubbard: "A Secret Fantasy". *The Guardian*, 22. May 1987).

We tend to avoid eating meat from animals that have died from natural causes. Only meat we have slaughtered ourselves is regarded as edible. This we explain with



reference to hygiene, and we enshrine the interdiction in formal legislation — no matter that there is little evidence to suggest that properly cooked meat from animals for example killed by a dog, or by accident, is necessarily more unhealthy for us than that we have killed. One farmer, for example, who had recently lost in heavy snows sheep that were being reared for their meat, recalls:

*Yes, in fact we didn't do too badly overall, seeing how bad it was, you know. Like, when we walked into the town we were passing the tops of signposts and traffic lights in places. But we were lucky. We'd been able to get most of the stock in near to the buildings and got enough food and water to them to keep them alive. Not all the farmers were so lucky nearby.*

Q. So what did you do with the ones that did die?

*Well, we couldn't eat them obviously. I suppose we might have got something for them, but in the end we just slung them into a pit. You wouldn't want them lying around for too long, you see, in case of disease.*

Q. But if you got to them more or less straight away, and they'd obviously been fairly well... refrigerated... after they died — why not eat the meat?

*Oh, no, you can't do that. It's just not healthy. You never know what's been up to with the meat if you haven't seen it done yourself.*

The nineteenth century French researcher, Decroix, put this proscription to a somewhat unorthodox test, taking the flesh of animals that had died in various ways (including a “mad dog”), cooking it, and feeding it to people without telling them its nature or its source; he noted no subsequent ill-effects in his participants (cited in Renner, 1944: 125). Our ambivalence must again be interpreted in the context of our relationship to the meat. It is necessary that we slaughter the animals destined for our tables ourselves — or rather that it is done by those we employ to undertake the task out of our sight, since most of us would find the actual killing upsetting. But the death must be at the hands of a human. For were we to eat animals that had died other than under our control, then by our own definition we would be scavengers, and that is not our favoured self-image. We may be powerful hunters; we may be skilled farmers; or we may be ingenious biotechnological manipulators — but we are always in control.

## Marketing & Retailing

THE MARKETING OF MEAT is essentially similar to that of any other commodity. There are problems peculiar to the merchandising of this particular foodstuff, such as the need to allow for the sensitivity of some customers and to adjust the sales approach accordingly,



but the essential process of selling meat and other animal products is much the same as that of selling wheat, hi-fi, or nuts and bolts:

The modern layer is, of course, only a very efficient converting machine, changing the raw material — feedstuffs — into the finished product — the egg — less, of course, maintenance requirements (*Farmer & Stockbreeder*, 30 Jan. 1962: 1).

*Meat actually struggles to get twenty per cent [profit], second time around. You're probably talking about twenty five or thirty if you're a first hand retailer of meat. But if you are purchasing it in, because there are two margins, you're probably looking at about twenty. If you're looking for twenty five then you then kill the interest of the consumer because you're asking for too high a price for it, and the alternatives that are on view in the supermarket chain, in ready meals with a meat-based content, are substantial. And also the convenience. So it's always a balancing act. That's the problem. We're looking at it every which way to encourage our market forces to be right.*

Yet again, a curious aspect of this situation is one which is normally taken utterly for granted: it is the very orthodoxy and unremarkability of our meat suppliers' assumption that slaughtered creatures should be accorded no more consideration than sacks of coal or microchips. Our indifference conforms, of course, to our classification of the entire non-human world as existing at a qualitatively lower level than ourselves — the ideological chasm separating *us* from *them* here being expressed in the incontrovertible idiom of Western economics. Its laws are portrayed as natural, so that considerations such as ethics can be of only secondary significance. The same meat company manager, for example, admits:

*My knowledge of vegetarianism is very limited, but I think ... if you look at the background of the people you are speaking to, obviously the attitudes towards morality will come from a certain section of people who are intelligent enough to consider it, and who actually get themselves very much involved in all the major issues actually which affect this world of ours, be it the nuclear situation, etcetera. I'm not saying that they're crusaders, but I think that they are deeply concerned, with no disrespect, because they are people who feel very deeply about these things. And they'd like to live in as near to an ideal world as can be managed. Now you and I both know that when you get into a much rougher market place then quite possibly that utopian idealism can't be sustained for financial reasons as much as anything, and just by the laws of nature.*

The inherent ideology is clearly communicated, quietly and without ado: (non-human) animals are resources just as are vegetables or minerals. By the very orthodoxy of its expression in the superstitiously incontestable terms of economics, to challenge the distinction is to assault one of the pillars of modern society, with consequent marginalisation of the argument. Traditional butchery outlets accordingly emphasise personal service and skilled selection and preparation of their wares, since such civilised



qualities are still sought after by many customers — qualities that simultaneously affirm our elevated refinement:

*I don't like to get my meat packaged. I like to see it... I mean, I'm old fashioned. I like to see it sliced.....*

**Q. So you'd say [your butcher] knows his meat?**

*Oh absolutely. He gets his own lambs. He picks them out. You know, he's very superior, and he knows how to cut it.*

[A Gloucestershire butcher] makes 12 to 18 prosciutto hams a year and sells it in thin slices for £1.88 per qtr. 'The process needs a lot of patience, particularly during the curing', he said. 'You have to make sure that you turn the ham once every 24 hours, otherwise it will develop marks and cure unevenly. There's a lot of love involved' (Butcher & Processor, Dec. 1987: 6).

*My customers need to know that the meat they are getting is absolutely top grade, and that's what I give them. They know if they come to me then it's nothing but the best... You know, it's very important to give people that quality, because otherwise my customers will feel cheated, and then meat might not have that special ring for them any more. Meat's all about that something a bit special, and if we don't give the customer that — if we try to cheat to make a bit extra on the side — then I believe that we'd be cutting our own throats.*

*Why is meat so important [to my customers]? I think, quite simply, meat is the only food that you can really get your teeth into in just that right sort of a way. Nothing else gives you quite that same feeling. It's got that bite. It's just sheer pleasure, somehow.*

Ideas of rivalry, violence, strength, moral fibre, and mastery are also implicit in the recent marketing slogans used by the Meat and Livestock Commission: "Nothing Competes With Meat"; "Slam in the Lamb"; "Lean on British Pork". The selection of slogans with such ambiguous imagery is more than coincidental.

#### 8. Imagery of power and violence is common in meat's marketing



The pages of the trade press offer numerous similar examples, testifying to the special potency that is basic to meat's social character. The front page of one issue of the



*Meat Trades Journal* (3 Aug, 1989), for example, bears a photograph of Oscar Clark, a meat inspector, bending steel bars with his teeth; another of his off-duty activities, we are informed, is pulling meat wagons with his teeth, all for charity. "Red packs quite a punch", proclaims another headline, leading an article on how a redesigned shop-front stressing the traditional meat trade colour of red achieved the "punchy" look a Reading firm desired (*Butcher & Processor*, May 1989: 19). A *British Meat* promotion a motorway service station offered a high-power MG Metro Turbo as a prize; sales of meat during the 4 weeks of the promotion rose from a normal 7 tonnes to over 12 tonnes (*British Meat*, Autumn 1989: 11). And meat advertising routinely portrays children in sporting or other competitive situations, the message testifying to the food's legendary strength-giving properties. Those charged with the marketing of meat continue to place significant emphasis upon power, and implicitly upon the control of nature. They, at least, clearly believe that these values are enduringly important to us, and will persuade us to continue to consume their product.

## Processing & Cooking

WE DO NOT GENERALLY EAT ANIMAL FLESH in its natural state. With the exception of periodic vogues for raw foods such as the Japanese *sushi*, or for certain culinary specialities such as *steak tartare*, the flesh that we eat has almost invariably, after killing, undergone a further transformation before we allow it to enter our mouths: we cook it. This apparently mundane observation is of singular significance, since we are the only species which does so, and every human society cooks at least some of its food. Routine and ritual cooking of food is one trait by which all human groups can be categorically distinguished from all other animals.

More accurately, in this way humans *distinguish themselves* from other animals. The dichotomising of us and them is a cultural rather than a natural distinction. This is clearly exposed in the catalogue of examples, largely from Amazonian mythologies, presented by Lévi-Strauss to illustrate his belief in cooking as the fundamental articulation of the distinction between nature and culture, although in this he is not alone (eg. 1970). Guy-Gillet (1981) similarly argues in a psychoanalytical context that humans, through cookery, unconsciously act as intermediaries between the 3 natural orders:



cosmological, zoological, and cultural. Carleton Coon also suggests that cooking was the “decisive factor in leading man from a primarily animal existence into one that was more fully human” (Coon, 1955: 63), and Boswell did likewise before him (Hill, 1964: iii.245, v.33n). Dando too, investigating the history of famine, states that control “of fire was a great step in emancipating humans from constraints found in the physical environment. Humans are distinguished from other animals by their general preference for cooked food” (Dando, 1980: 13). But Lévi-Strauss noticed that every known society processes at least some of their food “by cooking, which, it has never been sufficiently emphasised, is with language a truly universal form of activity” (1966: 937). The transformation (by fire) which “universally brings about the cultural transformation of the raw” (1970: 142) is, for Lévi-Strauss, the most profound and privileged expression of the transformation from nature to culture — or in other words, of the way in which human beings conceive themselves as different from the rest of the natural world.

However, as noted earlier, although he fails explicitly to distinguish between vegetable and animal foods in most of his writing, it is clear that Lévi-Strauss too is referring almost invariably to the cooking of meat, casually making the assumption that food simply is meat, in its purest representation. It is true that food, in general, is cooked, but in many cultures including our own not all vegetables are cooked, whereas meat almost invariably is, or is otherwise transformed from its raw state through processing, such as drying, salting or pickling. Cooking transforms meat from a natural substance to a cultural artifact.

It is clear, too, from Lévi-Strauss’s analysis that the significance of cooking is not entirely lost on the groups under consideration. Time and again, in culture after culture, myths are encountered which tell of the origins of fire, and it plays a key role in ritual. Prometheus stole fire from the Gods; the South American Gê people stole fire, and the skill of cooking meat, from the Jaguar (Lévi-Strauss, 1970: 66); the Chukchi of Siberia have strict rules about the generation and transfer of “genuine fire” and their fireboards are revered as family heirlooms, and both fire and fireboards play an important part in the sacrifice of reindeer. Amongst their neighbours, the Koryak, fire “signifies the source whence [domestic] reindeer originated”, indeed legend has it that the Supreme Being pulled the first deer out of the fire (Jochelson, 1908: 87; Ingold, 1986: 267-269). In Northern Canada too it is reported that by avoidance of raw food “the Chipewyan distinguish themselves from animals and eskimo” (Sharp, 1981: 231); and Audrey Richards notes in her classic study of *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia* the “savage” is quite erroneously supposed, “under the guidance of some superior natural instinct denied to his



civilised fellows", to eat his vegetables raw (Richards, 1939: 1). Clearly the notionally opposed savage invented by civilisation will be characterised by general contradiction of civilised behaviour; if we distinguish ourselves from barbarity by the cooking of meat, it is hardly surprising that savages should be presumed to subsist on not cooked meat, but raw vegetables.

Raw meat, from which the vivid red blood still drips, is what is eaten by wild, carnivorous animals, not by civilised humans. We put ourselves above animals in general by eating meat, and above other carnivores by cooking it. Raw meat is bestial, and cooking sets us apart. Appropriately, the genre of horror fiction involving degenerate individuals is an area where we often encounter the image of humans eating raw flesh. For example, an infamous "video nasty" available to the British public in the early 1980s, until banned, was a film entitled *Cannibal Holocaust*, the cover for which featured savage-looking women tearing with their teeth at raw, supposedly human, flesh — cleverly combining transgression of our proscription of cannibalism with the added shock of seeing humans consuming raw meat. According to one correspondent to an American magazine, the converse of this — humans *as* raw meat — provided the basis for a subtle joke about the doomed occupants of a fictitious spacecraft:

I wonder whether you, or anyone else familiar with *Alien*, questioned the meaning of the name of the starship Nostromos. Well, I did, and if my translation is correct, it was an appropriate, although morbid, name for the astronauts' craft.

Nostromos (Latin, neuter of *noster*, "our," and *omos*, Greek, "raw meat") literally translates to *our raw meat*...

Bruce E. Linderman. Arnold, Pa.  
(Omni, July 1979: 142).

There are occasions when the vulgar ubiquity of the symbolism of cooked meat is insufficient to communicate the desired message — when the potency of the symbol "in the raw" must be invoked to suggest the severity of spirit implied. The stark barbarity symbolised by uncooked meat has a rare capacity to disconcert us when its imagery is invoked in particular contexts. Raw meat, oozing blood, most strikingly represents the brute power of nature, undiminished by acculturation. In modern fields of combat, for example, the idea of raw meat as the very essence of brutal nature, red in tooth and claw, can be an effective statement of ruthlessness:

Lloyd Honeyghan, looking every inch the magazine-cover picture of a world champion, returned to London yesterday... to announce the next defence of his WBC and IBF welterweight [boxing] titles...



Honeyghan, resplendent in a £1,500 leather suit complete with studs, buckles, chains and horsehair epaulets — “they’re the scalps of my last two opponents” — will fight the WBC’s No 1 contender...

It will also be Honeyghan’s second title defence in two months, but he declared: “I want to fight as often as possible. I’m still so hungry for success I’ve been living on raw steak.” (*The Guardian*, 26. Mar. 1987: 28).

*Oh yes, I know it’s something that some businessmen do quite deliberately. You take the guy you’re negotiating with to a fancy restaurant for a business lunch and then order steak tartare. It totally unnerves the other guy, seeing you eating this raw meat with blood dripping out of it, and actually does make a difference — it can just give you that edge.*

To most people today, however, the image of raw meat is something to be avoided, if possible, reporting that whilst they do not mind eating meat, they find it difficult to deal with uncooked meat in which the blood is still evident, or that they are put off by the sight of veins and arteries through which the blood has coursed — a theme resumed in the next chapter. Even amongst those who revel in the thrill of sporting combat, the bloody associations of only partially cooked red meat can apparently be too direct a reference to its real-life equivalent. Although raw meat may be the ideal food for the fighter, according to Prue Leith it is not so appropriate for the spectator at the ringside. Describing a pre-fight dinner for 350 boxing fans, she interviews the man supervising the catering students who have deliberately overcooked the main dish:

I can’t bear the ruination of such perfect beef but the burghers of Sheffield wolf it down. I’m sent a note from Table 11. “Without a doubt the best meal we have ever had at a function. Food excellent. Service magnificent”.

Woodford says: “For the boxing fan it has to be a red-meat evening — but he wants blood in the boxing ring, not on the plate.” (*Guardian*, 5. Dec. 1987).

*I still don’t have a particular aversion. It still doesn’t bother me to see other people eating meat, and I do, whenever I’m home. But I don’t like going into butchers’ shops actually. It’s that smell of raw meat, and cooking pies. I find that a bit yeuchy.*

Q. Tell me, how do you find butchers’ shops?

*I don’t. I usually buy [meat] in superstores. It’s fine once it’s cooked, but raw... I hate the smell. You don’t smell it in superstores. But that stink... it just makes you go... yeurgh...!*

It is perhaps not surprising that the odour of raw meat should find relative disfavour, although the smell of raw meat is unpleasant in no absolute sense, any more than the scent of a sizzling steak is automatically appetising. Either can be attractive or repellant, according to our disposition. But smell is highly evocative, capable of conjuring distant memories literally out of thin air. It is the associations which we find distasteful



— raw meat perhaps particularly evoking the death of the animal, its not yet having become a cultural artifact by cooking.

In our everyday lives we indeed regard cooked meat in a quite different light than raw meat. With cooking, the bright redness of blood is turned to a less hostile shade of brown as the flesh is transformed from distasteful to tasty — or in other words, from unacceptable to acceptable. When still in its raw state, on the chopping board or on the butcher's slab, meat is not yet the stuff of mouthwatering delight. Only once it has begun to be cooked, to become an artifact of our culinary culture, does it bear thinking about as a foodstuff:

BETTY *It's funny though. I can look at a piece, a lump of meat, like a chicken, and do all the bits with it, and all the necessary stuff, and take out its entrails and what have you...*

STEVE *I bet you couldn't pluck it though!*

BETTY *Oh, I think I could, because when I'm looking at it like that I'm looking at it, like... differently...*

STEVE *Something to eat...*

BETTY *No, that's the thing! I'm not looking at it like something to eat; I'm looking at it as this... thing here that I've got to do this with, in the same way that in Biology you'd dissect... animals and rats and... you'd just do it. It's not something to eat until you've actually got it in the pan and you're cooking it and adding to it... and once it's beginning to cook. Then it becomes something to eat, but while it's just... a bit of animal lying on your chopping board, it's just something that you've got to do.*

*I was visiting my cousin in London, and she can't have been completely vegetarian yet then but she certainly didn't normally eat much meat. But she knew that I did eat meat, so for some reason when I came to stay she thought she should cook it for me... So she bought this mince for us, but then she was too squeamish to actually deal with it herself until it had gone brown! I had to fry it and stir it until all the red colour had gone — and then she took over and did the rest.*

Processing such as cooking transforms meat from a natural substance to a cultural artifact. Skilful manipulation expresses the supremacy of human civilisation, placing us above the mere animal, and its appreciation affirms to us our privileged status, to which can be attributed at least part of its added value. Skill is for this reason expected of farmers, butchers, and chefs. The greater is the skill required in the processing, the higher is the value of the end-product. Those we entrust with meat's provision must discharge their responsibility with diligence. Dining out, such skill is paramount, as exemplified by the recollections of two informants, one an enthusiastic meat-eater, the other vegetarian:



*...if it's a good restaurant and it's something particularly nice like a pepper steak or a mustard steak or something like that... if it's done nicely, it's a speciality... But I wouldn't go out and buy that... That is the nice thing about eating steak out, because if it is a nice restaurant it will have taken more time and more care in the preparation of it, and you'll really enjoy it as it's meant to be eaten.*

*I don't know if I'm just being really biased, but I went out for a meal yesterday with my dad and my brother and his girlfriend, and they all had meat, and I had an omelette because they didn't have any veggie stuff on the menu, and none of them liked their food! I keep noticing that whenever I go out with people and they eat meat and I don't, and they don't like their food and I do. I've decided that either people don't know how to cook meat, or people who eat meat are really fussy! I just keep noticing this, like whenever I go out with my mum there's always something wrong with the meat: it's either too tough, or it's not cooked enough... and meanwhile I'm always quite happily munching into my pasta with tomato sauce or whatever I'm having, and there's never anything wrong with that. People just never seem to be satisfied with it. Maybe they expect too much: like they order a big juicy steak, and it's not big and it's not juicy. It's just so important to people that it should be just as they want it and it never is.*

The entire process of procuring and preparing meat bears evidence of a relationship between powerful, predatory, "civilised" humans and our "legitimate resource" of non-civilised animals. The proper texture for meat presented at table, for example, is a matter of fine discrimination. If cooking, which tends to make meat more tender to the tooth, represents to us the qualities of humanity, it is perhaps not surprising that tenderness should be a quality highly valued in cooked meat:

*And I did sirloin steaks in wine. Then again, that was in the casserole, because I find steaks can be a bit... no matter how good your steaks are, grilling them can be a bit tricky, you know. They can be tough, which, you know, can be a bit upsetting if you produce a tough steak to a guest.*

*It's got to be a rump steak if it's like that. I mean a sirloin or something you could get away with, but by the time you get down to your stewing steak, you have to cook it for two hours or you end up chewing it for two hours.*

On the other hand, meat should certainly have some "bite" to it: something to get one's teeth into, that puts up a bit of resistance — a quality with which the value of challenge in hunting curiously reverberates. Of all foods, only meat is held to have this proper texture that gives full eating satisfaction. As one informant explains to his wife, that is why meatless meals are incomplete:

PETER *I think again, there's a sort of perceptual thing. I mean, if you eat... you need to actually chew.*

WENDY *That's meat though.*

PETER *No, no...*



WENDY *Yes it is, that is meat.....*

PETER *I mean, the thought of this sort of... bodyless sauce, for want of a better term, in the plate, that you could spoon up better than you could fork up...*

WENDY *But it's not!*

PETER *Well, tell me what you chew!*

Meat, we repeatedly hear, is a "tailor-made convenience food" (Marland, 1985: 7). If, as the Anthropology textbook claims (McElroy & Townsend, 1985: 175), central "to every culture is its way of obtaining food" then strictly speaking we are no longer gatherers, nor hunters, nor even farmers, but we live in an age of industrial food provision; we "go to the supermarket to choose among thousands of products marketed mostly by large corporations. Increasingly, these corporations control every step of the process of food production and preparation from the farmer's field to the fast-food restaurant".

In this world, convenience is a by-word for civilised society in which we have elevated ourselves above the daily grind of days gone by. In the words of the television advertisement "jingle": *"Menu Masters help you make time to live your life"*. We are masters. No longer do we merely save time, we make it, God-like. Convenience is leisure; convenience is the power to have the work done by other means; convenience is to be on top of the heap — and meat signals convenience. Why? Surely not for its functional attributes, since bread or a tin of baked beans would be equally convenient nutritional "filling". Meat is called a convenience food because it already stands for us as an expression of those same core values of modern Western society: of power, of superiority..... of civilisation.



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## The Barbarity of Meat

There is an urgent need for a new retailing philosophy. We are no longer in the business of selling pieces of carcase meat. We must make our customers think forward to what they will eat rather than backwards to the animal in the field.

— BRITISH MEAT, SUMMER 1987: 4

IT MIGHT SEEM ODD, if eating meat is indeed such an important statement of human power, that in so many ways we avoid reminders of its animal origins. Many people report that they prefer not to think about where their meat has come from, and that unwelcome reminders can be distinctly off-putting:

*I don't like it when you see bit of veins and things coming out of the meat... I think because it always reminds me of my own insides in a funny sort of a way. I suppose it's the idea of, like, blood flowing makes you realise that this slab of meat was once a bit of a functioning body, a bit like your own.*

*No I wouldn't eat heart or brains or anything like that. I'm not even at all keen on kidneys or liver, although I can eat a nice steak and kidney pie happily enough — if I don't think too much about it. It's the steaky bits I enjoy though! But heart... I had it once, a few years ago... but it was such a funny texture... just like I don't like tongue either... my mother used to adore tongue, but that was many years ago. I never enjoyed it at all. I know with heart it was just the thought of it. Like you know that the heart's meant to be all to do with love and romance — tell me how can you eat it?*

Q. And brains...?

*Urghh! No. I just couldn't! I'll just stick to ordinary meat that doesn't have that sort of texture.*



*I like a nice steak sometimes out of the freezer compartment, but I don't like it so much if you think of the — sort of animal running around. I mean, sometimes, with a chicken or something you get a piece of vein, and it sort of stares at you and you think: "My God, this was a living thing". I don't like that so much at all.*

*I'm sure I would have a lot more principles if I had to, you know... if anybody of us had to do the slaughtering I think we'd all be vegetarians. I shut my... my eyes to it, though I don't buy veal.*

*I don't like eating small animals anyway. A chicken is as much as I can cope with. I mean, any smaller birds and that, I can't eat. Pigeon, and things like that... It's... identifiable as a bird that was going "pschoom" past the window [whereas] a chicken — you don't normally see a chicken wandering around. We are... we are remote from it, in an everyday context.*

Meat marketing has had to undergo considerable changes in recent years. Whereas once it might have been sufficient simply to display whole animals and pieces of meat, secure in the confidence that the customer would be attracted by the sight of the flesh in its raw state, today the packaging of the product is a more delicate task. Consumer attitudes are in a state of flux, as one industry manager laments:

*The effect [of European policies] has been desperate, because being short of beef has pushed prices up when the consumer resistance was already becoming increasingly noticeable, so all you're doing is giving the consumer yet another reason for saying "well I don't see meat as being an attractive proposition".*

In an effort to assuage customers' apparent sensitivity to the nature of the product, meat is increasingly provided in such a form that its consumer need never see the animal flesh in its bloody uncooked state. Instead it quite likely arrives already cooked and reshaped in a sesame bun or an exotically-flavoured sauce, as a turkey roll or as chicken nuggets, in a crumb coating or a vacuum-package. More and more butchers' windows sport fresh green vegetables, fragrant herbs, and a stir-fry mixture. The most innovative shops diversify with in-store bakeries or specialist groceries. A deliberate process of disguising the source of animal foods has gathered pace in the twentieth century, as a response to consumers' growing unease with the idea of eating dead animals. A Tyne & Wear butcher, speaking at the National Federation of Meat Traders' conference, complains:

*'As a butcher I deplore deliveries being carried into my shop from the high street on the neck of a van driver — especially if they are not wrapped... I can think of little more guaranteed to turn pedestrians off buying meat than the sight of pigs' heads flopping about as he struggles past them with the carcass'* said Mr van der Laan.

Meat's connections with live animals had to be camouflaged (*Butcher & Processor*, July 1989: 7).



Traditional retailing centres around offering the public bits of animals and often identifies meat with livestock. But modern consumer attitudes shy away from this link and so the butcher would be much better served by thinking away from the animal and more towards the meal when dressing his window and presenting his products (*British Meat*, Summer 1987: 4).

In line with modern practice no direct reference is made to the live animal. No carcasses hang in the front shop and portions and cuts are as far as possible presented in ready for cooking form (*Butcher & Processor*, June 1989: 13)

Numbers of independent high street butcher's shops have fallen steadily in recent years, largely due to the competition of supermarkets. Whilst this pattern has occurred amongst shops of all sorts, supermarkets have clearly found it to their commercial advantage to present meat in conspicuously hygienic conditions, with all preparation completed out of sight. In such outlets only the best cuts are put on display; bones, guts, and skin are nowhere to be seen. The neatly wrapped package is effectively dissociated from the animal to which its contents once belonged, which is an attractive service to many shoppers — particularly those of younger age-groups:

*No, I don't often go [to the butcher's]. I'd as soon pick up a chicken leg or something from the Co-op when I'm going there anyway. I know that you don't get such good choice... it's just I've never liked these places, you see... oh, it just has that effect on my stomach... and then sometimes you see them with their bodies hanging there and that...*

*[As a local butcher] I'm obviously very aware that the sorts of folks we have coming in here, day after day, are... Well, it's not that we don't have plenty of young housewives, but I think it's obvious that most of our customers are just that bit older. They like the service that we offer... But I obviously have to wonder what that means for the future...*

Unfortunately for the industry, economic or presentational adjustments offer only a partial solution to such changes in receptivity:

*That's another dilemma... because the technology changes relatively slowly, but the market changes quickly. The market is very fickle at the moment. I've got a system here which is scientifically superb but commercially questionable. Because five or six years ago when we looked for the most progressive presentation that was the best that was available. It's moved on from that. And now we're into graphic presentation so that you're actually selling the picture on the pack, rather than selling the product...*

The extent to which even the less radical members of society today perceive something unpleasant about meat is illustrated by a 1989 television advertisement for Wall's pre-cooked sausages for the microwave. This segment of popular culture features



an upwardly-mobile young man (apparent from the smart house and working-class London accent) taking advantage of his health-conscious wife's temporary absence, to indulge in an old-fashioned treat, updated. The portrayal of meat as naughty-but-nice is a new phenomenon in its marketing, and the emphasis on "brown" — which occurs six times in the thirty second slot — is significant, stressing the fact that this product is not blood-red like other meat. Talking directly to camera, he hushes his audience:

"Shhh! Lucy, my beloved, seems to have over-oxygenated at her aerobics class, so she's decided to have 20 minutes under the sun-lamp browning. These days everything has to be brown... brown rice... brown bread...

Well, I'm keeping up with the Browns too, with these: new Wall's sausages for the microwave. [Eats one cold, winks, and smiles]. They're pre-cooked, so a couple of minutes in the micro and they come out piping hot and perfectly brown.

And they taste just like good old bangers. No mess... [glances as if listening for his wife upstairs]... and no evidence that anything but celery hearts and nut cutlets were ever here. Now that's what I call nouvelle cuisine!

We lessen the potential unpleasantness of having to acknowledge our food's origins by the names we use for the flesh of the larger domesticated animals destined for consumption. We do not eat cow, we eat beef; we do not eat pig, we eat pork; we do not eat deer, we eat venison. A recent exception to this principle has been sheep whose edible name has been changed from mutton to lamb, probably due to commercial pressures since mutton had developed associations of elderly toughness. According to Edwin Ardener:

This is the well-known process whereby loan-words from Norman French produced the parallel terms in English for 'live' and 'slaughtered' farm beasts: sheep/mutton, calf/veal, pig/pork, and cow/beef. Sir Walter Scott drew the conclusion that the split in the English categories reflected the fact that the English knew the product on the hoof, whereas the Normans received it cooked. The perpetuation of the division when the Normans and English became one speech community is less easily explained (Ardener, 1971: xxix).

The continuing use of foreign terminology by English speakers instead of the more direct Anglo-Saxon is, on the contrary, readily explained by the fact that this reduces the conceptual impact of stating the name of the eaten animal. Why we should be less inclined than the French to face up to the reality of our repast is another question. But it is clear that, in general, the British are reluctant to receive such reminders. The term *fleshers* has similarly gone out of fashion, and there are signs that even the word *butcher*, with its associations of blood-stained savagery, may be going the same way. Refurbished outlets featured in the trade press increasingly bears such names as "meat market" or "purveyor of fine meats", which again stress the food itself instead of its animal source or the function of its dismemberment. Likewise, the place where we have our animals put to



death is rarely nowadays officially referred to by the graphically descriptive term of slaughterhouse. The French term *abattoir* nicely serves to ameliorate the brutal reality of their service to our society. An informant sums up the syndrome by asking:

*Which would you rather have? A nice, thick, juicy, tender steak — or a segment of muscle tissue from the corpse of an immature castrated bull?*

To some, unwillingness to face up to the reality of meat's source can be a matter for moral reproof. Many people argue that to eat the flesh of animals that one would not have been willing to kill and butcher oneself is dishonest or cowardly. As one vegetarian informant put it, people should be more honest with themselves about the consequences of their actions, or else change their behaviour:

Q. How do you mean more "honest"?

*I think in Britain the meat industry is very dishonest. The people are not allowed to be aware of what's going on. To them meat is wrapped up in cellophane in supermarkets; it's very divorced from the animal that it's come from. The thing is that people see these intensive farming places as being unpleasant, but they avoid taking any personal responsibility for it, and so everybody just accepts this thing — that eating meat is okay, so the intensive conditions are okay. But it doesn't feel alright to me. People don't go down on the factory farm to see what's really going on down there. I think if a lot of people did do that, or go to the slaughterhouse, to see how the meat is produced, then a lot of them would become vegetarians.*

There is some evidence to support this informant's belief. Many first-generation vegetarians or semi-vegetarians relate their abstinence to occasions when, for one reason or another, they were made particularly aware of the connection between the meat on their plate and once-living animals:

*Oh yes, and the thing that really decided me: I was walking along the street one day, and this butcher was just getting its delivery from a van. This man came out of the back of the van carrying a cow's head, and the eyes were staring at me. It was just this head. That's when I said to my flatmate "Right, that's it. I'm not going to eat any more meat". So that's what really decided me in the end. I thought it was really vile...*

Q. So why is the head any worse than the rest of it?

*It's not really. I think it's just the thing about... if it's not got a head it doesn't look like an animal. I think it's really surreal. I was standing in a butcher's shop, buying meat for my dad I think, and there was all these carcasses hanging up all around me, and I had to really force myself to think that they were really animals.*

*I used to live opposite an abattoir. I wonder if that had to do with going veggie. The animals used to know when they were going to be killed and they used to try to break out, and they had to chase along the road and chase them back again. So that probably didn't help. I do remember once walking to school and passing*



*the lambs, and watching them playing about and jumping — you know how lambs play — and then it suddenly struck me that I'd eaten one the week before!*

*And really now, I don't enjoy eating meat. If I ever have to... if I'm ever out for a meal. I know it won't kill me but, if I take it, I keep getting these feelings, you know. I once asked for venison in a hotel years ago, and then suddenly got a picture of what it really was, and I just couldn't eat it [laughs]. So that's really my reasons, and then of course knowing it is better for me not to helps. But that was the real reason.*

Q. How do you feel about meat nowadays when you do come across it — as presumably you do now and again?

*Butchers' shops... I suppose I switch off to it. I try not to think of it as dead animal. You've got to somehow... put up with it, because it's all around. If you puked up every time you see it then life would get really difficult for you.*

A TREND TOWARDS AVOIDING REMINDERS of the animal origins of meat has gathered pace for many years. It can be seen as part of a wider movement in human behaviour, away from instinctive, biologically governed activity and towards socially determined patterns. Hans Teuteberg notes, for example, that human sexual function is no longer cyclical to the extent of most other species, and certainly, through the technological development of contraception and "test-tube" fertilisation, it seems that our progress towards control of such functions continues. Teuteberg adds that our food habits, similarly, are increasingly governed by choice rather than by nature:

Throughout history, a gradual loss of instinct... is apparent... Apart from initial hunger, an artificially evocable appetite led to the surplus intake of nourishment not required in the calorific system of man. The initial adaptation of diet behaviour according to nature was changed in favour of socio-cultural factors... Although the loss of instinctive diet habits often leads to overfeeding, it contains the possibility of... enhancing culture itself (Teuteberg, 1986: 14).

A similar principle is evident in Eckstein's (1980) development of the psychologist Maslow's "Hierarchy of Human Needs" (1943), which he analyses in the context of food. The hierarchy in question has five levels. At the most basic, *survival*, level, he suggests that humans will eat practically anything, which is supported by experience of famine, crisis or wartime, when food is in short supply. However, as Marshall Sahlins puts it, in normal conditions "men do not merely 'survive'. They survive in a definite way" (Sahlins, 1976: 168). When survival is no longer the issue, Eckstein argues that *safety and security* become the most significant considerations, and foods are generally divided into food and poison. If food supply is fairly secure, he argues, then *love and belongingness* come to



matter more, and commensual and other social elements of food come into play as important. If that is satisfied, then *self-esteem* becomes the next consideration, principally defined (in modern terms) by economic parameters. Finally, if all that is not at issue, then Eckstein argues that *self-actualisation* becomes the paramount concern, with foods classified according to a symbolism relating to personal identity.

This rather coarse categorisation cannot be taken at face value, yet there is something in the argument. It is interesting to speculate whether the symbolic element of food selection, comprising love and belonging, self-esteem and self-actualisation, may be more significant in the relatively affluent modern world which, perhaps somewhat complacently, regards its food supply as bountiful and secure, than in situations where supply may have been seen as more unstable.

Long-term cultural development is difficult to distinguish from the shorter-term variation of fashion, but may nonetheless matter. Even John Burnett, in relating falling sales of red meats in the post-war period to "its relative dearness in recent years", to the trouble of cooking it, and to an increasingly sedentary society feeling less need for "animal protein" (which, significantly, he apparently equates with beef rather than chicken), admits that, in addition, "the change from red to white meat may well involve complex physiological and psychological causes". Unfortunately he omits to elaborate upon what these might be (Burnett, 1966: 273).

One attempt to assess the thrust of social change over time is Norbert Elias's epic study of the history of Western manners from the Middle Ages, *The Civilizing Process* (1978 [1939]). Through a series of examples Elias shows how attitudes to a wide variety of things and standards of behaviour have moved in a consistent direction. Two of his examples are particularly relevant here, the first being his "biography" of meat's *ideal* representation over the period:

In the upper class of medieval society, the dead animal or large parts of it are often brought whole to the table. Not only whole fish and whole birds (sometimes with their feathers) but also whole rabbits, lambs, and quarters of veal appear on the table, not to mention the larger venison or the pigs and oxen roasted on the spit.

The animal is carved on the table. This is why the books on manners repeat, up to the seventeenth and sometimes even the eighteenth century, how important it is for a well-bred man to be good at carving meat... Both carving and distributing the meat are particular honors. It usually falls to the master of the house or to distinguished guests whom he requests to perform the office (Elias, 1978 [1939]: 118-9).



With the passage of time, however, reminders of the animal nature of the food are removed: first the head, or feet, or tail, and so on. It progressively becomes less polite for the joint to be brought to table, it instead being carved and served on a sideboard... and then later even further away, in the kitchen. Sauces, aspics or other presentational devices are increasingly used which effectively disguise the meat still further:

The direction is quite clear. From a standard of feeling by which the sight and carving of a dead animal on the table are actually pleasurable, or at least not at all unpleasant, the development leads to another standard by which reminders that the meat dish has something to do with the killing of an animal are avoided to the utmost. In many of our meat dishes the animal form is so concealed and changed by the art of its preparation and carving that while eating one is scarcely reminded of its origin (Elias, 1978 [1939]: 120).

Writing prior to the Second World War, Elias was sufficiently certain in his analysis to imagine extrapolation of the trends into the future. The evidence of the present study supports his prescience in judging that the same direction might continue for some time yet, since the "threshold of repugnance" he describes does indeed seem to have been pushed yet further in the intervening years:

There are even *des gens si délicats...* to whom the sight of butchers' shops with the bodies of dead animals is distasteful, and others who from more or less rationally disguised feelings of disgust refuse to eat meat altogether. But these are forward thrusts in the threshold of repugnance that go beyond the standard of civilized society in the twentieth century, and are therefore considered 'abnormal.' Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that it was advances of this kind (if they coincided with the direction of social development in general) that led in the past to changes of standards, and that this particular advance in the threshold of repugnance is proceeding in the same direction that has been followed thus far (Elias, 1978 [1939]: 120).

The second relevant trend noted by Elias concerns the well-mannered use of knives. Over the same period, the knife, he says, has evolved considerably from its rôle as a sharp instrument for carving and transporting meat to the mouth:

In the Middle Ages, with their upper class of warriors and the constant readiness of people of fight, and in keeping with the stage of affect control and the relatively lenient regulations imposed on drives, the prohibitions concerning knives are quite few. 'Do not clean your teeth with your knife' is a frequent demand. This is the chief prohibition, but it does indicate the direction of future restrictions on the implement. Moreover, the knife is by far the most important eating utensil. That it is lifted to the mouth is taken for granted (Elias, 1978 [1939]: 122-3).

With time the knife evolves into an implement used only as a cutter, to its gradual blunting as it becomes more of a pusher, to the modern American convention of its being



used to cut up food at the beginning of a meal and thereafter being left completely alone. With the prohibition on the knife being lifted to the mouth, Elias acknowledges that an element of rationally calculable danger is indeed present:

But it is the general memory of and association with death and danger, it is the *symbolic* meaning of the instrument that leads, with the advancing internal pacification of society, to the preponderance of feelings of displeasure at the sight of it, and to the limitation and final exclusion of its use in society (Elias, 1978 [1939]: 123).

An interesting development of this trend, half a century later, is the daily use of chopsticks in preference to conventional cutlery by many British vegetarians today. It is a curiously apposite corroboration of Elias's analysis that many of those individuals who profess themselves to be acutely concerned about violation of other human and non-human inhabitants of the world, and who express that concern through avoidance of animal flesh, should ultimately reject the knife altogether.

This is not to imply that the changes identified have occurred in a constant linear sequential development. There have of course been countless sub-themes and reactionary movements, times of little change and times of rapid change. The essence of Elias's argument is that the overall direction of change is constant, being the result of competition between the various configurations of society, such as families, strata, classes, nations, and other interest groups, and it is in the nature of such competition that the different forces will at times enjoy greater or lesser degrees of relative success. In the long term the tastes of one generation develop upon those going before, and the "dice are loaded" in such a way as to result in a consistent pattern of progress.

IN THE LONGER TERM, according to Elias's thesis, the direction of civilisation has been away from direct exultation in conquest, towards more urbane values. He finds that people, "in the course of the civilizing process, seek to suppress in themselves every characteristic that they feel to be 'animal.' They likewise suppress such characteristics in their food", (1978 [1939]: 118-9). He is not alone in positing the slow movement of culture away from purely competitive and hierarchical values. Todhunter suggests that this "century may be called the era of social conscience — a concern for the welfare of fellow man" (1973: 287). Perhaps more significant still, however, is the new concern for non-fellow-man. As Lecky notes in his nineteenth century "History of Human Morals":



At one time the benevolent affections embrace merely the family, soon the circle expanding includes first a class, then a nation, then a coalition of nations, then all humanity, and finally its influence is felt in the dealings of man with the natural world (cited in Singer, 1985: 9).

Calling such values "urbane" is an apt choice of phrase, since this trend is clearly not independent of other social developments such as the increasing centralisation of the human population in towns and cities. Turner suggests that:

simple geographic evidence almost requires a link between militant kindness to animals and the New England of factories and cities... To note that city folk take a livelier interest in kindness to animals than do farming populations is no novelty; indeed, it is almost a commonplace. Clearly urbanisation and industrialisation in some way helped to generate the new concern for beasts. But this is merely an observation, not an explanation (Turner, 1980: 25).

Julia Twigg likewise finds the process of urbanisation to have been a major motive force in stimulating a widespread reappraisal of the relationship between human society and other animals, and thus of meat as proper food:

Traditionally the imagery of meat and blood was developed within the wider context of humankind's higher and lower natures. People's higher nature pertains to the rational, the spiritual and the moral spheres, whereas the lower relates to the bodily and to all that is designated their animal nature. This division into higher and lower has its counterpart in a profound series of oppositions between up and down, heaven and earth, and mind and guts/ genitals.

Though this is an image of great longevity and power and one whose influence still contributes significantly to the meaning of meat, it is today a model that less clearly holds sway; other perceptions concerning bodily existence and the meaning of the animal have come into cultural prominence. The most important of these result from the accelerating growth from the eighteenth century of tender mindedness towards animals... The causes of this major shift in consciousness are obscure, however one factor of undoubted significance is the growth in urbanisation (Twigg, 1983: 26).

One reason the movement of people to cities should have this effect, Twigg suggests, is that it breaks the organic contact of people and animals, and throws into relief the arbitrary distinction between animals as food and animals as pets — a theme resumed in Chapter 9. Additional explanation is perhaps also to be found in the distinction traditionally drawn between what is thought of as natural and what is seen as cultural. If control of nature is broadly speaking a cultural imperative, then it is fitting that the most significant developments in culture should occur within urban settings. It is from towns that the Arts derive; the countryside produces mere crafts. Towns are principally human space: created, defined, and maintained by people. The countryside is less human: less



ordered, and more subject to the vagaries of nature. Attempts to impose human control there are subject to inherently uncontrollable factors such as the weather. Thus to town dwellers, country people are imagined — almost by definition — to be less civilised, since they are more directly associated with those natural processes which urban civilisation has sought to transcend. This is a characteristic which Gary Marvin, for example, observes of bullfight-hosting communities in Spain:

This notion of human control and where, how and when it is exercised is a fundamental concern in this culture. To be fully civilized is to be in control of one's self, in control of one's life and in control of one's environment. This control is a function of will which people put into operation to overcome, on the personal level, their own human animal nature and, more generally, the world around them. Control is thus the domain of culture; lack of it signals the domain of nature. To be fully civilized is to be fully removed from nature, especially to be removed from the effects of its unpredictable elements. To be civilized is demonstrated by living in the urban realm with fellow human beings, by emphasizing that which is distinctively human (as opposed to animal) in terms of behaviour (Marvin, 1988: 130).

It is appropriate that whilst the ethos of human domination was in the ascendant as the ultimate expression of civilised values, its vanguard activities, such as science and industry, should have been concentrated in urban centres. It is perhaps also appropriate that reaction *against* that ethos, in expressions of compassion or in such traits as vegetarianism — the “forward thrusts in the threshold of repugnance” that Elias suggests may be in the forefront of the civilising process — should also have been a largely urban phenomenon. This provides a possible indication of the future direction of “cultured” thought.

It is little surprise that those brought up in rural communities where the rearing and killing of animals is a normal part of life should continue to accept such realities more readily than those urban dwellers who have either no experience or wish for experience of such things, or who believe that civilisation should transcend such customs. One woman, who became vegetarian upon moving to live in a city, recalls that until she lost the experience of daily contact with farm animals, she had seen little reason for concern:

*I mean, as children, in the cattle fields, we used to go and sit on the gates, and look at them all, and have favourites and ones that would come up and let us pat them. And we'd spend hours round with them all. And I suppose I've always liked animals, but I can't say that I ever, as a child... I sort of thought it was horrible when they went away, but I didn't really think about it. We were never... we never talked about it with my brothers and sisters or anything. I don't think it was a conscious thing. I didn't ever think "how awful that we breed them to eat". It was just a natural thing that I didn't really analyse like that.*



A farming informant living and working in one of the furthest-flung Northern Isles, outlines much the same picture, seen from the other side of the divide. To her, urban culture is not necessarily the apotheosis of civilisation, but is also a relatively artificial context in which too many people have lost touch with important aspects of natural life. She too shares the feeling remarked upon earlier whereby consumption of animals for which you are not personally willing to take full responsibility for killing is seen as morally reprehensible:

*I think I would think differently living elsewhere. I'm not quite sure how it would affect me, but I would think differently living in an urban situation. I think I would probably eat less meat... I think most folk generally are very very rarely in a position where they have to kill anything bigger than... at most a mouse, and I find that even difficult, but... I think that maybe, the situation we're in makes you have to consider it, whereas elsewhere you don't because it is very easy just to switch off from it. And I think, it does give you a different — a wider — responsibility... as us being a species along with other species. I think that maybe a rural upbringing generally brings that about because, for example, one of the main things that affects us here is the weather. The weather is far bigger than us. The sea is far bigger than us. But in an urban society the weather is far less of a factor. You just don't see these things there. I think the effect is... that you become isolated there from what to us is one of the fundamental parts of being.*

THE DEVELOPMENT OF HUMANE THOUGHT, particularly since the time of the Industrial Revolution, can be viewed partly as a reaction by some members of society to the excesses of the ethos of human domination of nature, which was at that time coming to prominence.

The absolute distinction which Western society has recently tended to draw between humanity and the rest of nature is by no means a universal concept. MacCormack & Strathern (1980) show that not all societies contrast themselves with the rest of nature as we have tended to, and that terms such as nature and culture should therefore be used with care in discussing non-Western contexts. In many cases the spread of Western culture, such as through the influence of trading, settlement, and imperialistic religious missions, has introduced our attitudes to nature to parts of the world where such conceptions may not previously have existed. For example, the Sioux chief, Luther Standing Bear recalls:

We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with tangled growth as wild. Only to the white man was nature a wilderness and only to him was the land infested with wild animals and savage people. To us it was tame... Not until the hairy man from the East



came and with brutal frenzy heaped injustices upon us and the families we loved was it wild for us. When the very animals of the forest began fleeing from his approach, then it was for us the Wild West began (Quoted in Brown, 1972: 86).

The principle of nature subordinated to human desires is a feature of a particular intellectual influence that has gradually come to prevail in Western society since about the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, starting from within a scientific and intellectual élite, but which even there has never been universally shared. In Medieval days, for example, for most people the idea of humans coexisting with a living earth was more general (Merchant, 1982: 1-41). Even in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the relationship is said to have been more dialectical, with culture widely seen as affecting nature and vice versa (Brown & Jordanova, 1982). Animals were of course seen as different to humans, and normally inferior, yet were still commonly accredited with those "human" attributes such as reason and sensibility that were disputed by Cartesian mechanists. Indeed, until the nineteenth century, all across Europe, bees, pigs, cocks, and even weevils were still accorded enough responsibility to be tried for crimes against human laws or against nature, with full legal representation and sentencing (Evans, E. , 1987).

As long as the orthodox, triumphalist, philosophy has been in the ascendant, dissident individuals and groups have stressed not the division between nature and culture but the view of culture as an integral development of nature. Instead of emphasising control, such people commonly prefer to see society as a natural component of the entire living world, in a state not of parasitic manipulation, but of dynamic interaction with nature; not of unbridled power, but of empathetic harmony. Typical is a feeling of regret at loss of what is seen as our natural state, and refusal to accept mechanistic, dualistic doctrine as necessary or inevitable. The solution is generally held to be not to negate culture, but to use cultural attributes and advantages to define a new state of more peaceful coexistence within the world. This represents a challenge not only to the common opposition between Nature and Culture which gives the latter a supremacist rôle, but also to the conception of those who regard nature as intrinsically superior, and culture as antithetical to all that is wholesome and good — a conception which is sometimes represented as typical of all those who oppose humankind's excesses.

The simple contrast between nature and culture has long been recognised as an arbitrary distinction. David Hume, for example, claimed that the opposition between nature and culture was nothing but a fiction (1758: ii, 265), and Lévi-Strauss (1969) stressed that society and nature could not be easily separated, and that the opposition is probably



not inherent in nature but is an artificial construct of the human mind. Moscovici adds that the terms natural and artificial are inappropriate, since even when we regard ourselves as struggling against nature, we cannot help but be working with it at the same time:

Man's single-handed conflict with nature should be seen as a confrontation within nature; society is a crucial component of our vital constitution. Man participates *with* vegetation *against* animals, *with* electricity *against* mechanical power, in a continuous modification of the environment; the principles which unite him to his allies and oppose him to his enemies are precisely those which unite or oppose physical, biological and chemical beings. The bond between man and nature is also a bond between nature and nature (Moscovici, 1976: Introduction; italics in original).

Such distinctions are more than a matter of semantics. It might be argued that to dispute the validity of the nature-culture opposition is futile, since the existence of the concept ultimately indicates the perception of some sort of opposition by many cultures, if not all. Moscovici's argument might be dismissed as not particularly useful, since if the opposition remains in people's minds, but the definition is disputed, all that is achieved is the instigation of a search for some new terminology: if everything is, in the end, natural, then, logically, nothing is cultural, and we must look for a new word merely to express the same idea.

This, however, would be to miss the point, since the conflict between nature and culture is not merely a matter of hypothetical classification, but of value-loaded orientation. The distinction is not of society simply separate from the natural world, but of society pre-eminent. To dispute the formal categorisation by which our culture subdivides the world of perception is in effect to strike at the heart of the dominant cosmology. Alternative viewpoints are possible, in which the human race is regarded in at least a relatively less privileged position, but such views are unlikely to gain much influence as long as the orthodoxy whereby nature and culture are seen as naturally opposed, rather than culturally opposed, remains unchallenged.

Distinguishing the dominant notion of humanity above and unlike nature, from that of humanity as an integral part of nature, helps to resolve certain common misapprehensions. For example, many vegetarians and others seem happy to subscribe simultaneously to propositions which, on the face of it, appear mutually contradictory — such as that humankind needs to return to a more natural way of life, and also that it should evolve to a more civilised level of development. The resolution of the apparent contradiction is to understand that civilisation is not necessarily defined as *opposed to* nature, but may instead be thought of as a special *development of* nature.



Intrinsic to this divergence of opinion is the question of whether technological solutions can be found for environmental problems which are to a large extent the result of industrial and technological development.

Less industrially developed societies are commonly regarded as existing in a more harmonious relationship with nature. There is nonetheless little reason to romanticise such cultures, or our own past. However others may view their own relationship with nature, or however we may characterise them in contrast to our own supremacist creed, modern Western society is not alone in the damage it has inflicted upon its surroundings (Hughes, 1975; Greene, 1986). Timothy Weiskel (1989), writing about the anthropology of environmental decline, finds that:

While particular types of industrial pollution may be new and the scale of ecological devastation may be greater now than previously, the modern world is *not* confronting completely unprecedented circumstances — numerous civilizations before our own have confronted environmental degradation and have paid the price...

Many ecological catastrophes which have long been understood as “acts of God” or “natural disasters” were in fact largely generated or substantially aggravated by collective and cumulative human behaviour. The repeated pattern of the rise and fall of ancient civilizations in the Mediterranean region is especially revealing in this respect. Recent archaeological research indicates that there was a substantial ecological component to the emergence and collapse of agricultural complexes in ancient Mesopotamia, Phoenicia, Palestine, Egypt, Greece and Rome.

These civilizations had solved the basic problem of producing food surpluses and collecting raw material from rural areas to sustain large urban populations engaged in commerce, ritual, government and the arts. Over time the strategies that each society pursued to produce food and procure resources left their characteristic mark on the environment. Some of these strategies proved not to be sustainable and overtaxed the regional natural resource base resulting in the depletion of water, soil, or forest reserves. The general pattern was one of gradual emergence, brief flowering, and rapid collapse of civilizations, often taking the form in the final stages of devastating military struggles for the control of arable land or essential resources (1989: 98).

Most peoples control their surroundings to some extent, if only to fend off potentially dangerous predators, to some extent modifying the ecology in the process. This does not, as such, say much about their philosophy of nature. Some societies might be just as antagonistic to their environment as ourselves, yet have been less successful in controlling it. Other, perhaps more environmentally vulnerable, societies might perceive a need to accommodate the vagaries of natural forces in their cosmologies, yet continue to strive to master the threat with considerable effect. Whatever the ideological context, it is clear that great civilisations and small-scale subsistence societies alike have exploited



the physical fabric of their environments, sometimes to such a degree as to render them barely inhabitable:

It would be quite wrong to allow the impression that environmental damage is a unique feature of the last 200 years, or that primitive man was, in some subtle way, instinctively attuned to his natural environment so that he only damaged it when he made errors through lack of skill or knowledge... The rates of his operations were probably much slower than those we see today but we are left with the impression that the lifestyle of early man contained the same tendencies to destruction but that he lacked the opportunity and the techniques to match our present achievements (Harvey & Hallett, 1977: 62-63).

The unique aspect of the modern situation is how far control has finally been achieved, and the degree of damage to complex natural systems which has been inflicted as a consequence, if not an objective, of the struggle. It is the sheer scale of the impact which leads many people today to question whether the pursuit of environmental conquest can still be regarded as a natural process. A vegetarian insurance salesman, for example, puts it in this way:

*I've always thought... though I think more — or at least I've noticed more — people are starting to say the same sorts of things... I mean, people say that it's natural for us to kill animals and hunt and so on, because we've always done so... but, well, beavers build dams and cows fart [laughs] but they don't shit concrete all over the whole bloody world like us, or turn the atmosphere into one big chemical experiment.*

The implication is that activities which might have been regarded as natural and thus acceptable when conducted on a smaller scale cannot necessarily be so considered when undertaken at the global level. Given the dramatic and continuing expansion of the planet's population over recent history, this in turn implies to some people that the aim should not be to strive to return to previously natural ways of doing things, but that a new, higher level of civilised development is required in which a more equitable and less destructive approach towards the natural world is arrived at. Such views are explicitly formulated by a range of individuals, including a philosophy student and an actor:

*Last time I was doing pub collections for Greenpeace I kept finding groups of people — usually guys — who were really defensive about it and seemed to want to get at me, as if they wanted to prove me wrong so they could feel okay about doing nothing. Sometimes they'd ask me if I was vegetarian, and being me of course I'd get into this discussion with them, and what I always found myself saying was that I don't eat meat because we don't have to eat meat. We just don't need to. Maybe it made sense in the past or if you're living in a rainforest somewhere, but nowadays that's just not natural and we're killing ourselves because we won't grow up.*



*Quite honestly I believe that civilisation ought to have got beyond all that by now, though I know you wouldn't think so from looking around you sometimes. I mean, it's a bit pathetic isn't it, running an entire society around the idea of trying to destroy and consume as much as possible, whether it's good for you or not... in fact whether you enjoy it or not. I think lots of people slave their guts out to buy things that they've forgotten how to even enjoy. It's really a bit pathetic isn't it. Surely there are things that matter more than being able to stuff large bits of dead animal down your throat every night or having more go-faster stripes on your flash car than Joe Bloggs next door. Why can't we get it together to start speaking some sense to each other, and look after the world, and each other... I'm sure if we did then everyone would be a lot happier, not to mention still alive...*

The common thread to these various views is their belief that civilisation can mean more than the expression of overwhelming force. There is a widespread agreement that the control of nature by whatever means necessary may have been a necessary and worthwhile endeavour in the past. But many now believe that attitudes which previously stood us in good stead may no longer be appropriate in a world that humans have become so powerful in remodelling: that it is necessary also to recognise that we remain animals which depend on nature for survival. In this conception, culture can also stand for a benign state, with human skills and intelligence put to positive use in developing a more harmonious relationship with its surroundings. This implies little less than a comprehensive redefinition of much that civilisation has long entailed.

THERE ARE SEVERAL INFLUENCES whose combined effect may have played a part in diminishing meat's reputation as an unqualified good. Firstly, there is a growing perception that whilst the quest for environmental control may once have been a justifiable, and even necessary, pursuit, this is no longer the case. Many members of society are unconvinced about the need for a continuing war of attrition against the natural world. The battle with nature has largely been "won", even if the victory in the end turns out to be pyrrhic. As the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Robert Runcie, puts it: "The initially endangered species, humankind, has become the endangering species" (*Guardian*, 18 Sept. 1989: 2). Keith Thomas observes that over the years, the success of human society in taming the perceived danger presented by wild animals removed a large part of the original justification for the endeavour:

As the threat from wild beasts receded, so man's right to eliminate wild creatures from whom he had nothing to fear was increasingly disputed (Thomas, 1983: 287).



Much the same assessment, though expressed with an interest in assuaging concern, is presented by Marilyn Chou, speaking at a food industry symposium, who seeks to suggest that the reputed environmental "crises" are overstated, and instead interprets the situation as showing that our:

economy and standard of living have developed to a stage of well being that we can now afford to be concerned about unknown risks which may or may not affect us and future generations... these concerns are legitimate, but represent those which only an affluent society can afford... Since 1950, the widespread use of chemical fertilizers has increased yields by over 50 percent, and helped to decrease the cost of food...

This ability to tame nature has caused today's generation, unfamiliar with her destructive capabilities, to view nature as only good, kind, safe, wholesome, and superior (Chou, 1979: 19).

The clear implication is that today's generation is misguided in failing to see nature as the threat requiring the firm control that previous generations have sought to acquire. An alternative interpretation of the same evidence would be that the power of science and technology, which have given the human species its current degree of control over nature, need no longer be indiscriminately applied, but should be used with restraint and consideration. Chou evidently regards the non-specialist public as ignorant of the threat which nature still presents to human life. However, parts of that public evidently regards the high-technological food industry, as both an active and as a symbolically representative component of the entire industrial-scientific system, as a potentially greater threat to the health of the population than its wild alternative. This is a perception that can only have been heightened by increased general awareness of severe environmental degradation on a global scale — a topic returned to in Chapter 14.

The explosive growth of information and education might also be pointed to as an associated motive force for change, since awareness of the various issues and ideas involved with meat appears to be such an important variable. No part of Britain is immune from the influence of the so-called information revolution of recent years. Even on Fair Isle, which claims to be Britain's most isolated community, an informant admits that her family's eating habits have been influenced by new ideas:

Q. When you say you've been influenced by "modern thinking", how would you say these ideas disseminate onto the island?

*Radio, I'd say mainly. Occasionally we get newspapers, and when I do get one I'll read it thoroughly. It tends to be off the island I'll get a newspaper. We get magazines. I tend to have an interest in that anyway I think: health, fitness. I may tend to pick up things like that, and I have the radio on the whole time, so I'll pick things up that way.*



A food writer illustrates this phenomenon, reflecting on the decline of the bloody roast as an object of attraction. Even though her epicurian tastes incline her to relish red meat in its rare, bloody glory, she recognises that this image no longer meets with the general approval it once enjoyed:

Ugly or clumsy food is unthinkable now. And I am the most fearful hypocrite. I like nothing better than really rare beef, but close-ups of bleeding sides of sirloin with glistening fat went out in the Sixties along with strings of onions and earthenware casseroles. So, though I'll put the recipe for roast beef in the cookbook, I wouldn't have it photographed. And, as market research tells us that modern home cooks choose the recipe by the pictures, not, as in the old days, by the index, I must be contributing to the falling sales of roast beef" (Prue Leith, "Oh God, Not another vegetable terrine!", *Observer* magazine n.d.: 61).

If there has been a movement in favour of avoiding reminders of meat's animal nature, then the general growth in information that has been a characteristic of recent history might be expected to count against meat eating. A wider diversity of views is more widely communicated through different media today than at any time in the past — a state of affairs not altogether to the liking of those representing the *status quo*, such as a representative of the Meat and Livestock Commission:

Children come home from school having heard opinions and participated in discussions about many aspects of life that would have found no place in school curricula 20 to 30 years ago. The established way of things is less readily accepted; alternatives are more readily explored.....

So the science of systematic exploitation of media opportunities is as well understood by small specialist groups as it is by large companies or industry organisations. However, there is the additional benefit to the former that the minority view is more interesting (Harrington, 1985: 2,3).

Diversity of views is not sufficient to *cause* change, but increasing availability of information may be hastening the pace of change. The changes, however, can also be understood as a continuation of the sort of long-term processes identified by Elias, including the various aspects touched on here, conditioned by modern circumstances. The common thread to so many of the ideas discussed in this work, as in Elias's history of manners, is of human civilisation as a constantly developing process.

OUR SOCIETY HAS LONG FAVOURED MEAT for the implication of environmental domination that it embodies. Some people, however, have chosen to avoid it, also for that which it represents. The *ideas* involved are frequently much the same, but the



degree to which these are *positively* received varies widely. Whilst its meaning is perhaps broadly welcomed by those who believe, consciously or not, in domination, by those who wish for a more sympathetic relationship with their environment the message may be received more equivocally. Thus, the very same symbolic meanings can be transacted between those holding quite different beliefs in the same society. Meat remains a symbol of our species' dominion over the natural world, but how that meaning is perceived largely depends upon one's personal cosmology. Refusal to eat meat may thus be seen to signify rejection of more than merely the substance itself:

*I mean when I see people going into butchers' shops it really cuts me up [laughs] — yeah, almost literally — It feels like that... as if it's me that's on the block, because I'm sort of responsible for it. Actually it really makes me cry sometimes. I just think, God, how can all these people go on gorging themselves on such lovely animals without caring at all? It's the whole society which encourages it and makes it seem like it's something wonderful to be so horrible and barbaric. I have visions of these people as monsters with blood running down their chins... but to most people it's just normal — that's what I find hard to understand.*

It is not necessarily the fact of meat which is rejected, in terms of health or nutrition, nor even the direct implication of how the particular animal in question has been treated and killed. With some people a diminishing taste for meat may indicate only a vaguely formulated unease with certain aspects of society's management of its environmental affairs, which may be articulated as an expression of concern about meat's healthiness or price. Others may revile the entire complex of cultural values which engender ill-treatment of the non-human world, and consequently reject all associated culinary icons such as meat, as well as much of the output of the technological food processing industry. The latter is the case, for example, for a "socially and politically aware" partner in a cooperative vegetarian café who had recently visited Nicaragua:

*Maybe if it was a different culture, with a different set of values with it... I think if I'd stayed in Nicaragua for any length of time I might have found myself eating fish for instance. But when I'm here, when I'm in this country, this society, it's all bound up with the attitudes in this society and I couldn't... Actually, I thought about meat quite a lot in Nicaragua. I thought: would I change my lifestyle — would I start eating meat — if I was living there in a different culture... with a different set of values? If perhaps I was Nicaraguan and had to go and fight the Contras, would I still be vegetarian? I wasn't sure of the answer. There's a different set of values over there. The relationship between the animals and the people across there is a lot different. You don't get any intensive farming. It's a lot more... honest. They'll eat meat about once a fortnight if they're lucky, so if I was to go to them and say that I don't eat meat they'd think that I was silly.*



Author Richard Bach sounds a similar note when reflecting on his dietary habits in a semi-autobiographical novel. He associates the consumption of meat with a brutal view of the world — typical of a society with which he no longer feels fully at one — whereas his learning to perceive the possibility in a more spiritual way of life brings with it greater respect for other forms of existence, which precludes consuming their flesh:

Once I would have ordered bacon or sausage for this meal, but not lately. The more I had come to believe in the indestructibility of life, the less I wanted to be a part of even illusory killings. If one pig in a million might have a chance for a contemplative lifetime instead of being skrockled up for my breakfast, it was worth swearing off meat. Hot lemon pie, any day (Bach, 1985: 23-24).

Red meat has traditionally been a potent expression of sheer brute power, particularly for “red-blooded” males — a value which was for many years widely endorsed throughout Western society. Today, meat still represents much the same principle, but a redefinition of the desirability of that trait is can be seen, and meat’s attractiveness is reduced accordingly:

Meat can here stand not for maleness in an approved sense, but for what is seen as a false, macho stereotype of masculinity. Thus ‘strength’ and ‘power’ becomes ‘cruelty’ and ‘aggression’; masculine vigour and courage become violence and the forces of human destructiveness. This perception is epitomised in the pacifist critique of war and of militaristic values, with which vegetarianism has close associations (Twigg, 1983: 27).

In Chapter 6 it was noted that cooking, and particularly the cooking of meat, is a universal human cultural trait. It is accordingly significant that cooking too should be rejected by some. The principle of cooking still denotes developed civilisation, but in such cases as a negative rather than a positive indicator, reversing the normal symbolism. Even at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Shelley was writing in his philosophical notes to *Queen Mab* (1813), that “Prometheus (who represents the human race) effected some great change in the condition of his nature, and applied fire to culinary purposes; thus inventing an expedient for screening from his disgust the horror of the shambles. From this moment his vitals were devoured by the horror of disease” (quoted by Cox & Crockett, 1979: 51). Certain modern approaches to healthy dietary practice, accordingly, argue that raw vegetable foods are a better basis for life than cooked animal foods:

No one would question that cooked foods have the ability to sustain life. What is questioned by doctors and scientists involved in research into raw diets is whether cooked foods are capable of regenerating and enhancing health. For, unless the genetic inheritance of a person is exceptionally good, a diet too high in cooked foods can lead to slow but progressive degeneration of



cells and tissues, and encourage early aging and the development of degenerative diseases. Why? Some of the reasons no doubt depend on the fact that many essential nutrients are destroyed by cooking. Studies have shown that food processing and cooking — particularly at high temperatures — also bring about changes in the nature of food proteins, fats and fibre which not only render these food constituents less health-promoting to the body, but may even make them harmful (Kenton & Kenton, 1984: 35).

The medical sciences have also weighed in with evidence to suggest that it is the cooking of meat, rather than the meat itself, which sometimes is harmful. One such piece of research by Dr Barry Commoner of Washington University, Missouri, for example, postulates the existence of “culinary carcinogens”. It is fitting that cancer should be the disease whose likelihood is found to be increased by eating cooked meat. Cancer, more than any other illness, is widely regarded as a disease of affluence, caused by the environmental pressures of modern industrial living:

As it was the *cooking* of beef rather than the beef itself which appeared to be the source of the mutagen, Commoner went on to investigate a few common domestic cooking procedures. Quarter pound portions of lean ground beef were cooked in a ‘home hamburger cooking appliance’ for 90 seconds (rare), three minutes (medium) and five and a half minutes (well done)... the mutagen content of the well done hamburger was fourteen times greater [than the rare one]. Enough, Commoner claims, to cause concern (*Sunday Times*, 17 Sept. 1978).

For many vegetarians, the central assumptions of the orthodox food system are essentially reversed. For example, whereas meat — which intrinsically implies the death of an animal — has conventionally been the highest prestige food in Western society, the most valued foods amongst vegetarians, and particularly Vegans who will eat no animal products at all, are commonly nuts and seeds: in other words the parts of the plant which can be eaten with *least* harm to its survival. Indeed, some Fruitarians restrict themselves to eating only such products. These foods are widely praised by vegetarians as most full of vitality — particularly, with seeds, when they have been caused to begin to sprout and the life forces seen to be activated. This is often explicitly contrasted to the deadness of meat, and also of over-refined industrial food products. Similarly, staple crops such as wholegrain rice may be extolled as an ideal food of the highest nutritional and spiritual value, in contrast to its processed equivalent’s reputation as a mere fill-you-up in the conventional scheme of thinking.

Meat is intrinsically linked with the red colour of blood — with its series of associations, largely concerning power, violence, and danger. It is therefore significant that in recent years the major hamburger retailing chains have been tending to reduce the



amount of reds in their decoration and advertising. Pastel shades, it seems, play down the association with the mode of destruction and domination.

9. Edinburgh hamburger restaurant: old-style



10. Two Edinburgh hamburger restaurants: new-style

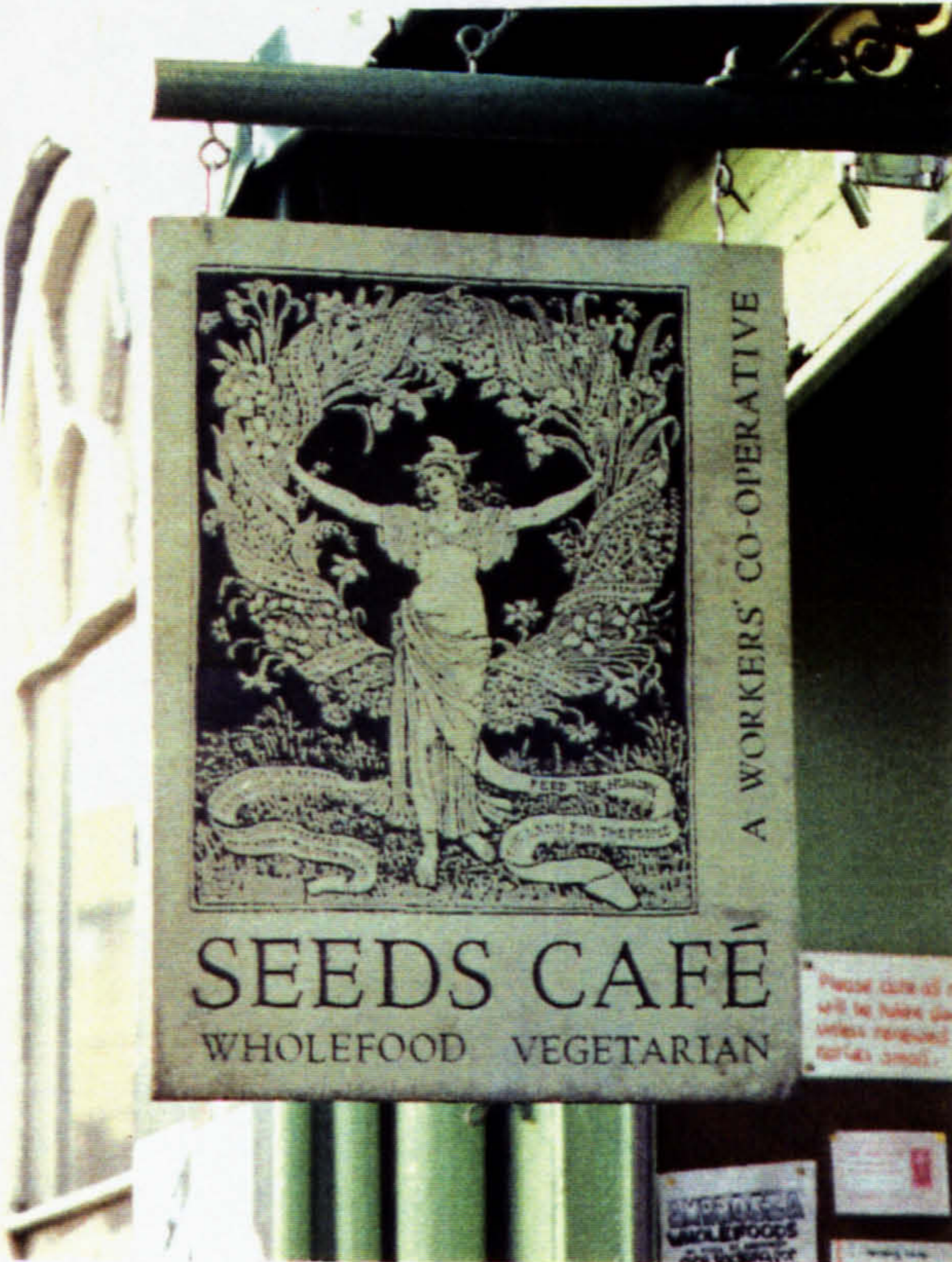


It also is curious that the complementary colour of red — (the colour which, if you stare at a red light and then close your eyes, you will “see”) — should be green: the colour that so often symbolically opposes it, on the face of a traffic signal and elsewhere. Green,



the colour of chlorophyll, stands increasingly for nature, for health, for freshness. It is the colour adopted by environmentalists who campaign for political and economic policies more attuned to the harmony of nature, and by the vegetarian movement.

11. Green has been adopted by vegetarian concerns



From many quarters there are signs that the old orthodoxy has been falling out of favour, with growing concern about the negative social and ecological implications of that ideology permitted to operate unchecked. There is evidence too of a reversal in the ideas and meanings predicated upon that old order. Those who hold the conventional assumption that human interests automatically override the interests of any other species are increasingly accused of arrogant hypocrisy and injustice. And concern is no longer restricted to a few well-meaning people who can be conveniently marginalised. Even the voices of such establishment figures as members of the British Royal Family are heard to call for new thinking, and in the mainstream media the principle of unconditional human primacy no longer goes unchallenged:

I note (Guardian, June 15) a Norwegian fisheries commission's condemnation of "the seals' greedy hunt for food" that may "ruin" local fisheries. My, those thoughtless, selfish, greedy seals! Strange that we didn't hear condemnation of the greedy fishermen who overfished herring and capelin — the seals' natural food — to the point of exhaustion. Or am I being naive? (David Gent, Letters, *The Guardian*, 17.6.88)



In spite of some people's suspicion that concern is limited largely to cuddly-looking creatures such as Pandas, or to awesome lions and tigers, there are even signs of some people re-assessing their attitude to insects and rodents:

*But I also get really annoyed nowadays when people kill flies and wasps, and spiders. A friend of mine killed a spider the other day and I got really annoyed. I told her that if I'd known she was going to kill it I would have caught it and put it out of the window. Though maybe I wouldn't be so keen on the one in Australia. But it was a while ago I read Richard Attenborough's book about "Life on Earth", all about spiders and insects, and I liked insects after that. I remember sitting in the garden one night and there were lots of little ants crawling about, and I'd read all about how wonderful ants were, and then I looked, and there were lots of ants, and I thought "You're not so bad after all"! They all laugh at me at work because I catch the wasps and put them out. I just can't watch someone else swat them with a newspaper.*

*I really don't know why some people seem so concerned about mice. I mean they don't do anything like the harm that people seem to think, and as for being scared of them, that's just plain silly. I say that because I actually had one in the kitchen for a time last year which kept coming in and out, and I admit I didn't really want it scurrying around the kitchen, but I certainly saw no reason to kill it. It was only living its life after all, poor thing... I was told you could get traps which catch them alive but the two shops I enquired at didn't seem to have heard of such things. But in the end he simply stopped coming anyway. Maybe he found somewhere with a better menu.*

Ill-treatment of animals, or of the environment in general, may be seen not just as wrong, but as barbaric or uncivilised, with comparisons drawn with other once accepted practices that are now beyond the pale. This again reverses the traditional expression of civilisation through domination. Within this frame of reference consideration for the other inhabitants of the planet is regarded as a mark of cultured development, and transgressions against such standards as less acceptable behaviour. The novelist Richard Adams, for example, paraphrases Jeremy Bentham to conclude his view of the fur trade as an inhuman debasement of civilised standards:

*The luxury fur industry represents by far the worst abuse of sentient, warm-blooded mammals at present condoned by law in the Euro-American world: first, on account of its large scale; second, on account of the gross cruelty involved; and third, on account of the unnecessary nature of the end product... The time is not far off when the fur trade will be universally seen, like slavery and child labour, as a barbarous anachronism... What is it worth to our collective self-respect to abolish this stigma? £50 million? If you feel it's not worth any economic sacrifice at all, then perhaps your self-respect needs updating. The question is not can animals reason or communicate. It is: can they suffer? (Adams, 1989: 9).*



The new ideology, in stark contrast to tradition, regards domination of other creatures as a sign not of civilised elevation, but of regrettable backwardness. Activities such as hunting, whereby domination and control have been demonstrated for so long, are accordingly disparaged in appropriate terms:

John Hick, the director on Exmoor of the League Against Cruel Sports' deer sanctuaries, describes [hunters' justifications] as "pathetic piffle". Once you get behind the beaming façade of a stag hunt, he says, "there is a lot of barbarity. And the arrogance of them all! But the tide is turning against them, and it's turning very fast." (Keating, 1988: 17).

"A man who spends his whole life following animals just to kill them to eat... is really living just like an animal himself" (Braidwood, 1957: 122).

If this orientation were restricted to a few "animal rights activists" and ethical campaigners then its significance might be limited, but examples from throughout the meat system show that elements of these ideas now extend far wider than that. The implications for meat production are considerable should the recent reappraisal of values continue.



# MEAT

## A NATURAL SYMBOL

### Mixed Meataphors

CHAPTERS 8 TO 10 DESCRIBE SOME CURIOUS ASPECTS OF THE MEAT SYSTEM WHOSE SIGNIFICANCE MIGHT BE OVERLOOKED.

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ARENS ARGUES THAT CANNIBALISM MAY NEVER HAVE EXISTED IN ANY SOCIETY EXCEPT IN EXTREME CONDITIONS OF HUNGER. HE AT LEAST SHOWS THE PRACTICE TO BE LESS WIDESPREAD THAN IS WIDELY BELIEVED. ITS PROSCRIPTION ACCENTUATES THE BOUNDARY WE PERCEIVE BETWEEN OURSELVES AND OTHER CREATURES, AND OTHER HUMAN GROUPS.

#### 9. Pets and other Grey Animals..... 156

SINCE WE MAINTAIN CONCEPTUAL BOUNDARIES BETWEEN OURSELVES AND OTHER SPECIES, ANIMALS THAT FALL INTO A "GREY AREA" BETWEEN THE TWO CATEGORIES TEND NOT TO BE EATEN. WE THEREFORE AVOID EATING PETS, PRIMATES, AND CARNIVORES FOR THEIR SOCIAL, PHYSIOLOGICAL, AND FUNCTIONAL PROXIMITY, RESPECTIVELY.

#### 10. The Joy of Sex..... 169

THE IDEA OF WOMEN AS MAN THE HUNTER'S SYMBOLIC PREY IS ONE EXAMPLE OF THE ASSOCIATION OF SEX WITH FOOD. DOMINANT MALES HAVE LONG MARGINALISED WOMEN BY COMPARING THEM TO UNTAMED NATURE, WHICH ILLUSTRATES MEN'S TRADITIONAL VIEW THAT TO BE CIVILISED IS TO DOMINATE THE "LOWER" ORDERS.



# 8

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## The Reluctant Cannibal

Going around saying "Don't eat people"  
Is the way to make people hate you  
Always have eaten people  
Always will eat people  
You can't change human nature!

— *THE RELUCTANT CANNIBAL, FROM, AT THE DROP OF A HAT*  
WILLIAM FLANDERS & DONALD SWANN

ONE POTENTIALLY NUTRITIOUS FOOD ITEM that does not normally figure on menus in modern Western society is human flesh. In this chapter I will argue that our habit of not eating each other is a vital piece in the jigsaw of beliefs which inform our views on that which we can and do eat. We frequently hear, of course, of societies in other times and other places who have practiced cannibalism. We are reared on endless stories of these so-called savages from what seems to be a comprehensive literature by authorities such as explorers, missionaries, anthropologists, colonial administrators, and archaeologists. It comes then as a surprise, if not an affront to common sense, to hear it suggested that there may in fact be no "adequate documentation of cannibalism as a custom in any form for any society" (Arens, 1979: 21).



In *The Man-Eating Myth*, Arens reviews the documented instances of cannibalism and reports himself unable to unearth a single reliable first-hand eyewitness account of the act in progress as a customary event, anywhere, ever. (He does not count cases under conditions of survival, such as sieges or the aftermath of the aircraft crash in the Andes mountains when some survivors resorted to consuming those who had perished (Read, 1974), nor occasional accounts of eccentric individual behaviour). Each time ritual cannibalism is said to have occurred, he claims, investigation reveals that the supposed anthropophagy is based on either hearsay or plagiarism, or is reputed to have occurred in the recent or distant past, or amongst other nearby or distant societies, or else is based on manifestly unreliable testimony.

The phenomenon, he argues, is supposedly so well known to exist that its occurrence is repeatedly assumed *prior* to consideration of the circumstances of a particular report, instead of its being approached with due scepticism. For example, with what he says is the one and only published account from an anthropologist who claims to have actually witnessed cannibalism [amongst the Amahuaca of the Peruvian-Brazilian border] (Dole, 1962), Arens finds that in this otherwise detailed description, no mention is made of the crucial stage of pulverisation between the removal of a dead child's bone fragments from its cremation pyre and the mixing of "bone-powder" to be drunk:

If the author did indeed see the bones ground into powder, why is this not mentioned in the text? If she did not see this action take place, then how is it possible to say that the powder was actually the ground bones of the child? There is no doubt we are dealing with a complicated process reminiscent of the shell game, except in this instance a pot and bones are the constantly shifting items... Rather than this material being used to support the idea that cannibalism exists, the opposite is the case. The prior belief in the existence of the custom is the necessary first step for accepting this account. It is not possible to state with any degree of certainty that the Amahuaca do not practice 'bone ash ritual endocannibalism,' nor can it be said with any assurance that they do. As usual we are left with doubts and a mystery (Arens, 1979: 37-38).

Arens similarly deals with many other well-known instances of cannibalism, ranging from Hans Staden's sixteenth century account of the practice amongst the Tupinamba in South America, which he suggests is not only untenable but may itself be the source of many succeeding reports phrased in suspiciously similar terms; to Aztec man-eating, which was likewise, he says, reported by no eyewitness; to more recent reports of cannibalism from Africa and New Guinea (including Gajdusek's Nobel prize-winning work on transmission of the *kuru* disease amongst the Fore people), to archaeological evidence.



ALTHOUGH IT IS LOGICALLY IMPOSSIBLE to disprove the existence of any social practice, since a single properly documented instance could overturn any such argument, Arens's analysis and conclusions should convince most readers that the phenomenon of cannibalism is, at least, much more rare than is generally believed. The significance of his work, however, lies not only in his incisive perspective on the reports themselves, but in his consideration of the phenomenon as a whole and his willingness to turn the spotlight around to observe the observer. As Arens says:

The most certain thing to be said is that all cultures, subcultures, religions, sects, secret societies and every other possible human association have been labelled anthropophagic by someone. In this light, the contemporary, though neglected, anthropological problem emerges more clearly. The idea of "others" as cannibals, rather than the act, is the universal phenomenon. The significant question is not why people eat human flesh, but why one group invariably assumes that others do. Accounting for a single aspect of an overall system of thought, rather than an observable custom, becomes the issue (Arens, 1979: 139).

He resolves this problem by looking with fresh eyes at the common characteristics of our own views on the matter, where he notes three points in particular: firstly, the "basic notion that customary cannibalism not only still exists but was once much more pervasive. Second, the subject matter is mystified by resorting to a specialized vocabulary... Third, the objects of all the intellectual energy are the primitives"...

Much to our satisfaction, the discussion of cannibalism as a custom is normally restricted to faraway lands just prior to or during their "pacification" by the various agents of western civilization... "they," in the form of distant cannibals, are reflections of us as we once were (Arens, 1979: 18-19).

Here is the crux of the matter. Defining other people as cannibals, Arens argues, is often an instrumental act whereby the alleged perpetrators are placed outside the realm of civilised culture and into a category with lower animals.<sup>1</sup> (Alternatively, a group might describe *themselves* as cannibals, the postulated transgression of such basic standards being used to convince outsiders of their ultimate power or lawlessness). In Arens's view cannibalism is an unwarranted, but widely useful, instance of collective prejudice: an "aspect of cultural-boundary construction and maintenance. This intellectual process is part

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<sup>1</sup> It is similarly common for tribes to appropriate for themselves the title of 'man', referring to other peoples as 'monkeys' (Needham, 1978: 5)



of the attempt by every society to create a conceptual order based on differences in a universe of often-competing neighbouring communities. In other words, one group can appreciate its own existence more meaningfully by conjuring up others as categorical opposites" (145). And in this respect, he says, we are in no major respect different from the "primitive" peoples upon whom we pass implicit judgement. "However, as befits a complex society, we have the services of a distinct scholarly discipline to systematize the simple notions which must serve among primitive peoples" (169).

Such beliefs are, however, by no means restricted to anthropologists and other academics. Shakespeare, for example, used the device in conjunction with physical deformity to impute sub-human status to peoples encountered abroad. His hero recalls memories:

... of the Cannibals that do each other eat,  
The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads  
Do grow beneath their shoulders  
(*Othello*, I.iii)

## 12. A tabloid's view of "cannibalism"

**DAILY STAR**  
NATIONAL CONSUMER NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR  
THURSDAY FEBRUARY 2, 1989 20p

See Big Frank's fight in FREE Vegas!

As Philip gets the go-ahead for Hirohito trip, cannibal is named

**JAP WHO ATE OUR TROOPS FOR DINNER**

**DAILY STAR NEWS Inquiry**

- Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's body was found in the ruins of a small town known as a ghost town after he fled to the island of Taiwan.
- The young star's body was cut up and served as a meal only hours after he had been captured and executed in 1945.
- Details of the atrocity were revealed in Washington's *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* after the former's editor-in-chief, James H. Murray, had been told by a source in Tokyo that the story was true.

**FULL HORRIFIC STORY - Page 5**



Accusations of cannibalism are still regularly employed to designate others as uncivilised. A modern example of the implicitly racist nature of this symbol can be seen in the front-page feature from a tabloid newspaper in February 1989, in the midst of political controversy about British national representation at the funeral of Emperor Hirohito of Japan, still believed by some to have been a war criminal. **"JAP WHO ATE OUR TROOPS FOR DINNER"**, screams the headline, reporting US war archives reportedly documenting the eating of a dead British airman at a **"Japanese general's jungle cocktail party"**, one of **"no fewer than EIGHT files giving horrifying accounts of Japs eating human flesh"** (Daily Star, 2. Feb 1989: 1, 5; capitals and bold in original). The implied non-humanity of the entire culture effectively incriminated is indeed spelled out, in case the reader be left in doubt:

News of the appalling atrocity revolted British Far East veterans last night.

But a spokesman for the Burma Star Association said: "The news does not surprise us one bit.

We always knew they were animals — now we have the proof that they were cannibals".

In the light of Arens's arguments, however, it is interesting to note that the evidence — reportedly given by a Japanese officer on trial for war crimes to a US military tribunal after the war — states that the cases occurred "when the Japanese Army ran short of food in 1945", and may therefore have been (if it indeed took place) under what might be termed survival conditions. But more significantly the report is again not based upon a full eyewitness account:

...the general mentioned to me that there had been an execution that day and we should send for some meat.

"I took that to mean the body of the Allied pilot...

Everyone had a taste... and although I wasn't specifically told I always understood we had eaten pieces of the allied flier."

The importance of Arens's revelation is considerable. If Arens is correct, aversion to eating the flesh of our own species, under normal conditions, may yet be a universal social phenomenon. If Arens is correct, one function of the phenomenon is to demarcate cultural boundaries: to mark ourselves off as civilised, as a higher form of life: as human. Normally, the contrast is drawn between ourselves and others, the cannibalism label being used to denote them as less human than ourselves. Occasionally, alternatively, it crops up ostensibly describing our uncivilised past. An occupational psychologist, for example, uses the motif in discussing the importance of first impressions in job interviews:



But what are those crucial, early impressions based on? "Probably on unconscious body language of the kind that was useful when we lived in the jungle — meeting a stranger we hadn't long to make up our mind whether to eat them or share our food with them. Most human beings make very fast decisions about people" (*Scotland on Sunday*, 25 June 1989: 19).

If Arens is correct, the very potency of an accusation of cannibalism levelled at any individual or group of outsiders is explained by the depth of feeling with which we maintain the proscription against this practice. Potentially at stake is quite literally our humanity itself. Perhaps what is most significant about the aircraft crash in the Andes (Read, 1974) is not that a few survivors were willing to resort to cannibalism but that several *would not* do so, so strong was their aversion, and perished as a result.

In disputing the existence of normal cannibalism, Arens directly criticises the integrity of generations of anthropologists who, he suggests, have almost all been naïve in accepting its mythology as if it were documented fact. He indeed implies that this willing acceptance indicates a measure of implicit racism in such anthropological work. Not surprisingly, this damning indictment has not been widely welcomed within the discipline. In a review article in *Man*, for example, Peter Rivière calls it a bad book and "also a dangerous book" (1980: 205) and, in the preface to a volume on the ethnography of cannibalism, Tuzin and Brown simply say that he is wrong (1983: 3). They nonetheless concede the plausibility of Arens's "suggestion that the common *attribution* of cannibalism is a rhetorical device used ideologically by one group to assert its moral superiority over another" (1983: 3), even if they cannot accept that anthropologists might in fact be one such group.

It may, however, be significant that most of the contributors to Tuzin & Brown's volume stress the symbolic or ideological dimensions of the alleged practice, rather than seeking to validate its authenticity. Thus Poole concludes that for Bimin-Kuskusmin, "the idea of cannibalism implicates a complex amalgam of practice and belief, history and myth, and matter-of-fact assertion or elaborate metaphor (1983: 31), whilst Sahlins finds that "the historical practice of cannibalism can alternately serve as the concrete referent of a mythical theory or its behavioral metaphor" (1983: 91). For whilst the factual basis of many reports might be questioned, there is no doubt that cannibalism is regularly reported, and that is itself meaningful.



WHETHER OR NOT anthropophagy is indeed universally proscribed, it is clearly not normal practice in modern Western society. As one component of our classification of potential foodstuffs, I intend to show that this rather obvious fact is of central significance. In our ways of thought, our patterns of ideas, its influence extends far beyond mere consideration of whether or not we would enjoy consuming human flesh. The reason is that defining what is *not* edible logically carries implications as to that which is edible. In our own culture, at the broadest scale of resolution, the assumption that we do not eat other humans enables us, by simple opposition, to consider anything non-human as potential food — animal, vegetable, or mineral — unless it is proscribed for other reasons.

That, however, is an untenably broad level of analysis. In practice, classification is very much more complex. Many things are proscribed for many reasons and the reasons given will rarely tell the whole story. In the next three chapters I intend to show how these notions, of inedible, civilised human beings opposed to the edible, primitive wilds of nature, extend to permeate our thinking in some unexpected ways. Meanwhile, it is worth noting how cannibalism can be invoked to dispute conventional wisdom on the eating of meat.

Since belief in the edibility of non-human animals depends upon keeping a clear conceptual division between them and ourselves, it is perhaps not surprising that attempts to contest the justice of meat eating commonly refer in some way to cannibalism. Such arguments typically confront the boundary between them and us as an arbitrary or inappropriate distinction, pointing up the similarities between species, rather than the differences, to make their consumption seem less acceptable, by bringing them conceptually into the fold of humanity. George Bernard Shaw, for example, described meat eating as “cannibalism with its heroic dish omitted” (Cox & Crockett, 1979: 54). Whenever, likewise, “murder” is applied to the killing of a non-human animal, there is an imputation of quasi-human status to the animal concerned. The *Smiths* pop group, for example, recently entitled one of their top-selling record albums *Meat is Murder*.

A fine example of this brand of argument, worthy of extended treatment, is Elisee Reclus’s classic polemic “On Vegetarianism”, which first appeared in the *Humane Review* in January 1901. Throughout the piece Reclus makes reference, in one form after another, to



the implication of cannibalism. He starts by recounting his first encounter with butchery as a small boy, comparing his own frame to that of a carcase...

I seem to have heard that I fainted, and that the kind-hearted butcher carried me into his own house; I did not weigh more than one of those lambs he slaughtered every morning (Reclus, 1901: 2-3).

...which he rapidly counterpoints by likening the sound of a dying pig to a child:

She cried without ceasing, now and then uttering groans and sounds of despair almost human; it seemed like listening to a child (3).

Reclus then goes on charge us with being no better than wild animals ourselves, as demonstrated by the conduct of our soldiers in war in China...

how can it be that these wild beasts with human faces take pleasure in tying Chinese together by their garments and their pigtails before throwing them into a river? And who are these frightful assassins? They are men like ourselves, who study and read as we do... (5-6).

...before making explicit the connection he perceives between the eating of meat and the abrogation of civilised status...

But is there not some direct relation of cause and effect between the food of these executioners, who call themselves "agents of civilisation," and their ferocious deeds? They, too, are in the habit of praising the bleeding flesh as a generator of health, strength and intelligence. They, too, enter without repugnance the slaughter house, where the pavement is red and slippery, and where one breathes the sickly sweet odour of blood. Is there then so much difference between the dead body of a bullock and that of a man? The dissevered limbs, the entrails mingling one with the other, are very much alike: the slaughter of the first makes easy the murder of the second... (6).

...and finally grasping the issue of cannibalism, declaring that other animals should be accorded like consideration:

But however this may be, we say simply that, for the great majority of vegetarians... the important point is the recognition of the bond of affection and goodwill that links man to the so-called lower animals, and the extension to these brothers of the sentiment which has already put a stop to cannibalism among men. The reasons which might be pleaded by anthropophagists against the disuse of human flesh in their customary diet would be as well-founded as those urged by ordinary flesh-eaters today... The horse and the cow, the rabbit and the cat, the deer and the hare, the pheasant and the lark, please us better as friends than as meat. We wish to preserve them as respected fellow-workers, or simply as companions in the joy of life and friendship (8).



The entire argument is effectively emotive since it strikes at the heart of some of our most fundamental assumptions: that humans are not to be eaten, that animals potentially are, and that there is a clear dividing line between the two categories. By challenging us, through various devices, to consider the possibility that the distinction is not as clear as we habitually assume, Reclus attempts to persuade us to extend some of the same consideration that we like to believe we have for other humans, to other animals.



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## Pets and other Grey Animals

*I've been sitting here thinking about a winter in the war. I was 10 when the war started and 16 when it stopped, and the worst winters for me personally were '41 and '44. In '44 I went to stay with a friend on a farm in Holland, where I often went when we didn't have enough food at home... I arrived there on a very dark autumn night, and everyone sat down at the table, and there was this marvellous... not so much a stew as a ragout. And I ate and I ate and I ate. It was probably the first meal that I had that week. And everybody stared at me, and they were just eating carrots. And at the end of the meal, the farmer said to me — "Now I'm going to tell you what you've been eating", and you can guess of course what I was eating — a pet rabbit that had died of natural causes that morning, but as it was they could hardly bury it, so they put it in the pot, and I had just been eating that rabbit. And the feeling in that family: anti-me! They were too nice and too good to put the rabbit away, knowing that they had a family to feed. The family couldn't eat it, but I wasn't told it was that rabbit, and I just ate. I was 14, as was my friend. But of course it was her rabbit. I've never been forgiven.*

THE RABBIT has an unusual place in our categorisation of animals, since it is seen by some as a pet, and by others (or indeed, by the same people) as edible. However, we do not normally eat pets. An informant recalls:

*I remember hearing about an advertisement once in the States, when someone had put a small-ad in the paper for "Rabbits for sale: as pets, or for the freezer", and there was an amazing row about it... people couldn't handle the idea of both things in the same advert.*



An advertisement for either purpose would pass largely unnoticed, but to suggest both possibilities in tandem is evidently too direct a reminder of an anomaly in our classificatory system, and stimulates howls of protest from an outraged public. The upset caused by such contradictory views is also evident in this exchange between a married couple:

NEIL Yes, *what about rabbit?*

PAT *It's disgusting.*

NEIL *I like rabbit!*

PAT *I can't eat rabbit simply because I always think of the little furry pet. I just can't eat it.*

NEIL *Yes... "you've read the book, you've seen the film, now try the pie!"<sup>1</sup>*

PAT *I always think of rabbit as being a pet. I couldn't eat it... You made rabbit casserole once, and I forced half of a little piece down, and I just couldn't eat any more.*

NEIL *Yes, it was strange, because it was rather a nice casserole as well.*

PAT *It wasn't! It was rabbit!*

We do not normally eat pets. In Britain we do not eat dogs or cats, nor canaries, nor goldfish. The pretence of eating goldfish, for example, provided the basis of an infamous episode of television's *Candid Camera* when the presenter shocked members of the public by fishing pieces of carrot out of a fishtank and eating them. And according to the following reminiscence, the serving of pet guinea pigs to an important guest may just have been responsible, once upon a time, for warfare...

I have been reading Moira Meighn's *Adventure Book of Cookery for Boys and Girls Between 9 and 14 and Anyone Interested in Cooking*. (Oxford University Press, circa 1930). It has a ruthless quality lacking in contemporary cookery books. For instance, take the following story:

"It happened somewhere abroad, while Uncle Jasper was being a diplomat. A diplomat is a man who argues men of other countries into or out of making wars and other things. It happened on a very hot, thundery day, when a foreign diplomat who thought a lot about good cooking and good food and was rather thinking about forcing his country to make war on England, was coming to lunch.

"Uncle Jasper had told Aunt Jessica how glad he was she had ordered a specially good lunch, when the butler rushed in crying that the cook had small-pox, and the thunder had made the meat bad, so there would be 'No lunch! No lunch!'

" 'No lunch,' said Uncle Jasper, 'Nonsense! No lunch means war! See to it, Jessica.' "

Whereas most of us would have directed the butler to open a tin or suggested

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<sup>1</sup> A reference to *Watership Down*, by Richard Adams (1973, Harmondsworth: Penguin)



to Uncle Jasper to take the whole party out to the *trattoria*, Aunt Jessica was made of sterner stuff. She cooked her daughter's guinea pigs.

I have often wondered which country the diplomat represented, what he thought of the main course and whether the historians have got it all wrong. Perhaps it was not the invasion of Poland which led to the Second World War but lunch *chez* Jasper and Jessica. I am aware that guinea pigs were regarded as a delicacy by the Aztecs but I do not fancy them myself. Especially not tame ones. I am beginning to reconsider the whole matter of carnivorousness and I certainly could not eat a creature I had watched grow up from an infant.

Even Aunt Jessica wept a little as she slaughtered the pets, because "she hated more than anything having to cook animals she knew". Uncle Jasper, to give him his due, did write a poem to put on a tombstone over the little guinea-pig skins, but this is somehow not sufficient; it is moreover faintly kinky, and hypocritical. (Alice Thomas Ellis, "Guinea Pig Recipe for Keeping the Peace", *Independent*, c. 1988)

Few of us in this country, likewise, would enjoy consuming horse, although that is probably less unthinkable than roast of dog. "I could eat a horse" is an effective expression of extreme hunger not only due to the large size of the animal, but also because it implies a willingness to transgress normal standards of edibility on account of desperate need. Even then, however, we are unlikely to suggest that a slice of Pussycat Pie would make a tasty starter. The very idea of eating pets can be enough to put us off meat entirely:

*I once watched this film about... gangsters or something... and they made this man eat his pet poodles, because he really liked his pet poodles, so the gangsters mixed them up and made him eat them — pretended it was chicken or something — and then after he'd eaten them they brought out the silver plate and lifted up the lid and there was these poodles' heads underneath. And I could never eat minced chicken after that, but apart from that I always thought that human flesh would taste a bit like poodles. That probably didn't help — mashed up poodles on the television — I felt a bit sick after that film. That definitely put me off chicken; that's why I don't like Heinz chicken soup — because the poodles looked like chicken when they were all minced up. Chicken pie didn't taste the same after.*

By suggesting that poodle meat might taste similar to human flesh, this informant illustrates the principle reason that we do not include our pets amongst our food resources. Our avoidance is clearly related to the particular species' social proximity to ourselves as humans. As Simoons suggests, "familiarity with animals, particularly in functional relationships and as pets, led to the rejection of entire species of domestic animal. Avoidance of dogflesh in the Western world may have come about because the dog was the friend of the family and eating it seemed an act akin to cannibalism" (Simoons, 1967: 114). And just as in the last chapter it was pointed out that some campaigners evoke cannibalism



as a device to dispute the justifiability of eating other animals, so can the case of our curious attitude towards pets be raised to challenge conventional assumptions:

Q. Do you ever get "attacked" by people for being vegetarian, at all?

*Yes, I've had lots of arguments of that sort, but not particularly passionate ones usually; it tends to be more academic. I usually come out with something like "well, would you eat your pet dog?"*

By caring for pets, tending them, giving them proper names, we endow them with semi-human status. The foods we give them are usually modelled on human tastes: no manufacturer markets the mouse flavour or bluebottle flavour cat food which, if able to indicate its view, a cat might choose for itself. We allow them into our houses, and sometimes even into our beds; we talk to them; we give them special affection, special medical care, special exercise, special attention; we fret when they are unwell and weep when they die.

13. Pets may be given semi-human treatment, even after their death



We treat pets more like individual subjects than the abstract objects as which we officially regard edible animals — although some species we treat more favourably than others, allotting them a closer relationship to ourselves. For example:

as domestic cohabitants, dogs are closer to men than are horses, and their consumption is more unthinkable: they are "one of the family." Traditionally horses stand in a more menial, working relationship to people; if dogs are as kinsmen, horses are as servants and nonkin. Hence the consumption of horses is at least conceivable, if not general, whereas the notion of eating dogs understandably evokes some of the revulsion of the incest tabu (Sahlins, 1976: 175).

As honorary humans, pets cannot be consumed. As Marshall Sahlins puts it, speaking of the United States, "To adopt the conventional incantations of structuralism,



'everything happens as if' the food system<sup>1</sup> is inflected throughout by a principle of metonymy, such that taken as a whole it composes a sustained metaphor on cannibalism" (Sahlins, 1976: 174). And why is this metaphor sustained? The answer, I suggest, relates to the sanctity of the boundary between us and them, between human and non-human, between subject and object, between civilisation and its resources. The ideological sensitivity of the distinction is well illustrated by the occasional public outcry at activities which threaten to bridge the divide in any way:

Genetic engineering can provide life-saving drugs — it can also produce monsters. Again in the US, new animals, not new breeds but totally new species, may now be patented. Pigs 12 feet long and cows weighing 10,000 lbs are no longer a mad scientist's dream

The man/ape experiments in the US, Austria and China need no longer rely on fertilisation of a chimpanzee egg with human sperm. Genetic splicing can create a half man, a 'zombie', with great strength and limited intelligence, to undertake simple tasks — indeed, a new slave race (Letter to *The Guardian*, 30 June 1988, from Les Ward of the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Vivisection).

As a society, we seem to be distinctly uncomfortable about dealing with the concept of creatures which cannot be allocated neatly to one category or the other. We *know* that humans have rights and must be treated with appropriate respect since slavery, for example, has been officially outlawed. We also *know* that lower animals may be put into our service in whatever way we see fit. But we do not know precisely how we should perceive a being which falls between the two classifications. We would prefer, therefore, that such a creature were not invented.

In similar terms, we know that humans are not fit food. We know that non-human animals, unless proscribed for other reasons, are. But we seem to be less than happy about eating creatures which, for one reason or another, cannot be properly classed as one or the other. Any animal that threatens to straddle the divide in our thought between human and non-human, by coming close in some way, tends to be deemed inedible, lest it challenge our knowledge that other animals are food, but that we ourselves are not. Even a formal introduction may reflect cause for abstinence:

At last the Red Queen began. 'You've missed the soup and fish,' she said. 'Put on the joint!' And the waiters set a leg of mutton before Alice, who looked at it rather anxiously, as she had never had to carve a joint before.

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<sup>1</sup> Once again, with Sahlins, Food is taken as synonymous with Meat. See Chapter 1.



'You look a little shy: let me introduce you to that leg of mutton,' said the Red Queen. 'Alice — Mutton: Mutton — Alice.' The leg of mutton got up in the dish and made a little bow to Alice! and Alice returned the bow, not knowing whether to be frightened or amused.

'May I give you a slice?' she said, taking up the knife and fork, and looking from one Queen to the other.

'Certainly not,' the Red Queen said very decidedly: 'it isn't etiquette to cut anyone you've been introduced to. Remove the joint!' (Carroll, 1872: 240).

Modern Western society is by no means unique in avoiding the flesh of over-familiar animals. In the traditional Jewish code of laws "one finds two or three laws which provide for the humane treatment of those animals which help man in laborious agricultural tasks [so] some of the flocks must have been treated much more as we treat domestic pets than as mere farm equipment" (Niven, 1967: 10-11). As Simoons notes, this "reluctance to slaughter or eat familiar animals exists in many parts of the world. Among the Bari of Sudan, when a man's favourite ox grows old and is ceremonially killed, his friends eat the flesh, but the owner himself sits grief-stricken in his hut. This old notion that the ox which tills the ground should not be slaughtered is still found in modern Greece, China and Korea; and though it may derive in part from a desire to preserve useful animals, it is also motivated by affection for a companion or friend" (Simoons, 1967: 113). Simoons is correct, but the affection he cites is not of itself sufficient explanation. It is particularly dangerous because affection has the potential to undermine our clear categorisation of we and they.

ANOTHER CLASS OF ANIMALS that we do not regard as edible is the primates. Monkeys, gorillas, chimpanzees, or even the smaller primate species, are not thought of as appetising food by most Westerners. The reason has again to do with their closeness to ourselves as humans, although in this case the proximity is morphological or physiological more than social. Looking at primates we recognise something of ourselves. They look like us. Apart from the differing reason for their proximity, however, I suggest that our reasons for not eating primates are precisely the same as for not eating pets: their infringement on the cannibalism taboo. The threat is to our distinct humanity, the danger to our world-view which places us above and in control of the rest of nature, and which permits us to exploit as we will with moral impunity. The naturalist William Bingley observes, of monkeys, that there is:



something extremely disgusting in the idea of eating what appears, when skinned and dressed, so like a child. The skull, the paws, and indeed every part of them remind us, much too strongly, of the idea of devouring a fellow-creature (Bingley, 1820: i. 86).

Once again, we in the modern Western world are not alone in this trait. Tambiah, for example, relates the in-some-ways-similar attitude of Thai villagers towards the monkey which, he says, "suggests that the villagers themselves see in some of the forest dwellers an imitation of themselves. Eating monkey is forbidden in the village, and the taboo is said to derive from Buddhism. Interestingly, the monkey is avoided as food not because it is a "friend of man"... but because it is "descended from man"... This inversion of the Darwinian evolutionary theory is formulated in a story:... 'This woman with [12] children was too poor to support and feed them. The children therefore had to go into the forest in search of food, and they ate the wild food there. In the course of time, hair grew on their bodies and they became monkeys.' Monkeys are thus in a sense lost and degenerate human beings; their affinity to humans make them improper food. Yet it is whispered in the village that some people do eat them. Their animal and semihuman status is a bar to open cannibalism" (Tambiah, 1985: 191).

The hint at the end of this passage about accusations of cannibalism for eating monkeys bears intriguing parallels with such stories in our own society of people eating pets, which are a regular element in the phenomenon of popular stories passed from person to person, usually purportedly as direct second or third-hand knowledge, widely known as "modern myths". Such cases also share with "proper" cannibalism the feature that the party accused of so transgressing decent behavioural norms is normally in some way an outsider to mainstream society. One example is the tale of a couple visiting a restaurant, typically either abroad or run by members of a foreign ethnic group, who use sign language to ask that their pet dog be given food too. The dog is led off to the kitchen, and only too late do they discover that, due to a misunderstanding, they have been served and eaten their own pet. A variation on this theme was related to me by one informant as a memory of his home town:

*I think I'd draw the line at eating cats and dogs. But that doesn't stop Indian restaurants from serving dogs...*

Q. Has that ever been proved, or is it another of these apocryphal tales?

*Oh yes. There was one quite famous one of an Indian restaurant in my home town,*



where they were done for serving dog. I mean... there were certain benefits, like the number of strays there was kept to a minimum for a while.<sup>1</sup>

Revulsion at other societies' food habits, in contrast to the assumed normality of our own, is commonly used to imply their lack of civilisation.

14. The idea of eating pets can be used to suggest utter barbarism



**EVERY TIME YOU HEAR KOREAN OLYMPICS THINK OF THIS!**

Watching TV coverage of the South Korean Olympics this Summer you'll see all the traditional scenes. Smiling athletes, flag-waving crowds and the dramatic lighting of the torch.

You WON'T see the evil, uncivilised side of life in the host country. Outside Seoul's Olympic Park cats and dogs, just like our pets, will be brutally killed as *LUXURY* food for those who believe such dishes give them the strength and stamina of the animals.

Kittens, cats and dogs will suffer appalling cruelty as they are slowly hanged ... strangled ... clubbed ... or tossed alive into boiling water. Terror stricken animals, it's claimed, taste better.

For five years IFAW has patiently pleaded with the Korean Government to end the barbaric practices. Many promises have been made. Few have been kept.

Now it is time for action. We must demonstrate... **WITH A MASSIVE WORLDWIDE PETITION...** that such blatant, senseless cruelty is totally unacceptable.

One million signatures of protest are needed. That's one name for each cat or dog that will die in agony in the next year unless we act TODAY.

Please join us. Your petition signature, and your campaign support donation, are absolutely vital if we are to win. Help us carry a Torch of Hope this September... for the animals.

**TORCH OF HOPE**  
IFAW  
Help us win for animals!

**MILLION SIGNATURES PETITION TO THE PRESIDENT OF SOUTH KOREA**  
Sir, I urge you to ban the inhumane methods used to kill cats and dogs for luxury food. Such methods are unacceptable to civilized people.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_  
(Collect additional signatures on a separate sheet and send as soon as possible to IFAW. Every name counts.)  
I would also like to offer EXTRA help for the animals and enclose £ \_\_\_\_\_

Name (please print) \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
Postcode \_\_\_\_\_

International Fund for Animal Welfare, Section 120,  
Tubert House, New Road, CROWBOROUGH,  
East Sussex TN6 2JH.

**IFAW**

Source: *Guardian*, 27 May 1988

<sup>1</sup> Despite efforts to enquire into local sources, I have been unable to trace any further evidence of such an event in recent years.



Although many societies share the characteristic of avoiding species which are close to humans, *which* species are so privileged is by no means consistent from culture to culture. Many Amazonian Indians willingly eat monkeys, for example, and when preparing to host the 1988 Olympic games, the South Korean authorities took steps to prohibit local restaurants from offering dog on their menus, for fear of creating an unfavourable impression of their nation amongst the visiting Western tourists and media.

CARNIVORES are also, apparently, not to our taste. In fact this avoidance is doubly curious since, according to a certain sort of economic logic, the flesh of carnivores ought to be the most highly esteemed of all, since it is the most difficult and dangerous to obtain, and since such beasts are considerably rarer than the lower animals upon which they subsist. In Chapter 2 it was noted that until recently few in our society objected to the hunting and killing of carnivorous species and that slaying animals such as the big cats has indeed traditionally bestowed great prestige upon their conquerors. Those who could afford to do so have been keen to hang lions' and tigers' heads on walls, or lay their skins on floors. However, just as our society might sanction the killing of other humans under certain circumstances but never their consumption, although we may kill carnivores we will not normally eat them:

Q. How about eating... dog? Roast of dog?

*It wouldn't appeal to me, I must admit. I probably would, if there was nothing else about, if I was really really hungry... I think I would rather eat dog than grubs, or any sort of bug.*

Q. Why not dog?

*I don't know. I think it's that we're not used to eating any sort of carnivore meat, are we?*

Q. Why not?

*Because around here Man has done away with them... But would we ever have eaten foxes or wolves if they were killed, even going back in time? I doubt it very much. They would have used their fur, but not eaten them. I can see why we don't farm them certainly. It's basically just inefficient. Why feed them meat to produce meat? It just doesn't work, does it? They're only going to convert half of what they eat.*

Q. Though in a way you might expect that to be even higher prestige meat then.

*Oh yes, you could imagine it being a delicacy, yes. I mean, we'll have a shark steak or something — it is quite well liked, isn't it?*

Another example of this syndrome is the controversy that developed in Britain in late 1988 about the level of salmonella contamination in eggs and chickens supplied to the public. In the course of media investigation it was revealed that one principle cause of the



epidemic was that intensive producers had for some time been feeding the carcasses of dead chickens, inadequately sterilised, back to other chickens as a protein supplement, so that infection was constantly circulated within and between flocks. This disclosure stimulated additional outrage by members of the public who previously had been unaware of such practices. Concern seemed partly to stem from an uneasy feeling that by feeding the ground-up remains of dead birds to other chickens we were causing the animals to be unnaturally cannibalistic. However, since the creatures were now consuming animal protein this also meant that they had become carnivores. Even then, the poultry's new categorical status would surely have escaped widespread noticed had they not been destined for our dinner tables. But in the conventional British food system humans do not eat carnivores:

Q. You say you enjoy eating almost any meat, but... how do you think you would feel about eating, say, lion flesh, or wolf?

*Oh, I really don't know. Let me think about it... Er, no, I suppose if it came to the point and I was starving I'd probably eat almost anything, but I think that's something I'd really prefer not to. I don't know why. I've never really thought about it like that. I just can't imagine that I'd like the taste. It would be far too strong, and probably pretty tough...*

Q. If you were actually offered some on a plate, would you try it?

*Ha! To be honest I think I'd prefer not to. I'd have to be pretty damn hungry. I see what you mean... There's no reason not to try something, but I still think I'd prefer not to... It's not that I think it would actually be bad for me in any way, logically. It's just the thought of it which makes me think I'd feel sort of sick about it. I don't know actually — maybe there's something to do with their having eaten other animals... and so there's more chance of them having picked up something poisonous along the way or something? But no, I don't really think it's that. It's just the way I feel.*

The flesh of carnivores is commonly described, such as by the informant above, as tasting too strong to be eaten: a term that contains a clue to the source of the proscription. This, Julia Twigg says, "is the familiar anthropological concept whereby that which is most highly prized, most sacred, can, by virtue of its power, be the most defiling". She suggests that carnivores are "like a double dose, too much of a good thing" (Twigg. 1983: 22, 25). Certainly, it is not merely that those animals might be dangerous to catch — that might apply to some, but not to all, carnivorous species, and besides, many non-Western societies happily eat carnivores. Rather, they are strong by being in an evident position of power over other animals that they are able to hunt and to eat, and as such their place in the world is analogous to our own, since we too are held to be carnivores. The danger they present is to our minds as well as to our bodies:

The fact that only those animals who somehow invert their own natural order, such as the renegade lion or tiger and certain species such as the solitary



nocturnal leopard or hyena, sometimes prey on humans for food strengthens the symbolic association between cannibalism and antisocial behavior. Other species which in some way subvert the human interpretation of the natural order of things, such as the alligator, a reptile which inhabits the arena of fish, and the baboon, who physically parodies man and invades his domain for food, become other potential markers of evil. These are also the very species which human beings often exclude from their diet whenever possible because of their unsavory nature (Arens, 1979: 140-1).

In other words, once again, carnivores are close to us — not this time socially, nor morphologically, but functionally, and so to eat them would be similarly akin to cannibalism. (Of course some animals fall into more than one category, such as the especially privileged cats and dogs who are close to us both socially and due to their carnivorous habits). We eat only animals over which we are in a particular relationship of power and control, and carnivores cannot be eaten since their relationship to others is similar to our own. We accord ourselves the right to kill our own prey, and we accord carnivores the right to kill theirs. We respect them since they do not fit neatly into the scheme of things whereby humankind is at the unchallenged apex of a pyramid of power:

*No, I know that there's places that do that, but no: it's just not right, is it?*

*Q. Why is that?*

*Well,... a fox is a sort of special animal, isn't it? It's okay with sheep and cows and things because, like, they're just waiting there and not doing much. I don't mind the idea of that because, it's sort of like that's why they're there for us, isn't it? But a fox sort of like lives its own life. I mean, I can see why we have to hunt them to keep them down, but it wouldn't be right to eat them.*

Rodents likewise tend not to be eaten in Western society. It is an established part of our historical mythology that a sure sign of a Desperate Situation, such as in a city under siege, is when its starving population resorts to eating rats. The *Monty Python* comic team made use of this revulsion, in black humour, to provide a selection of recipes for preparing and cooking rats (Palin *et al*, 1973).

We justify our revulsion on the usual scientific basis of hygiene and the threat of contagion (*"you never know where they'd been, grubbing about and eating God-knows-what..."*) but, as Mary Douglas showed, our idea of dirt "is compounded of two things, care for hygiene and respect for conventions" (Douglas, 1966: 7). Douglas outlined how purity and defilement are reflections of systems of order and of contravention of that order (1966: 35), and that in any clear system of classification there may be intermediary or ambiguous cases which will tend to be treated with caution. It is significant that rodents are distinct



in resisting clear categorisation, particularly with respect to their proximity to ourselves. In this case the uncertainty derives from their residence: whether they are beasts of house or of field. Although rodents are not meant to be admitted to the human domain, they are renowned for their ability to find their way in, in spite of our best attempts to prevent them, to the point of sharing our food. They defy our classification as they defy our control, even within our own ordered human space:

*I'd rather have a spider around than a mouse.*

Q. Why?

*Because you can catch spiders and put them out! Mice run too fast and you can't catch them.*

Q. Why do you want to catch them?

*To put them out!*

Q. But why put them out?

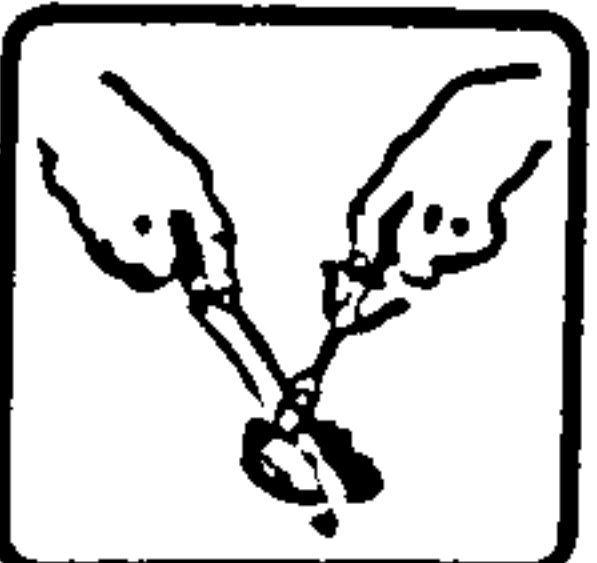
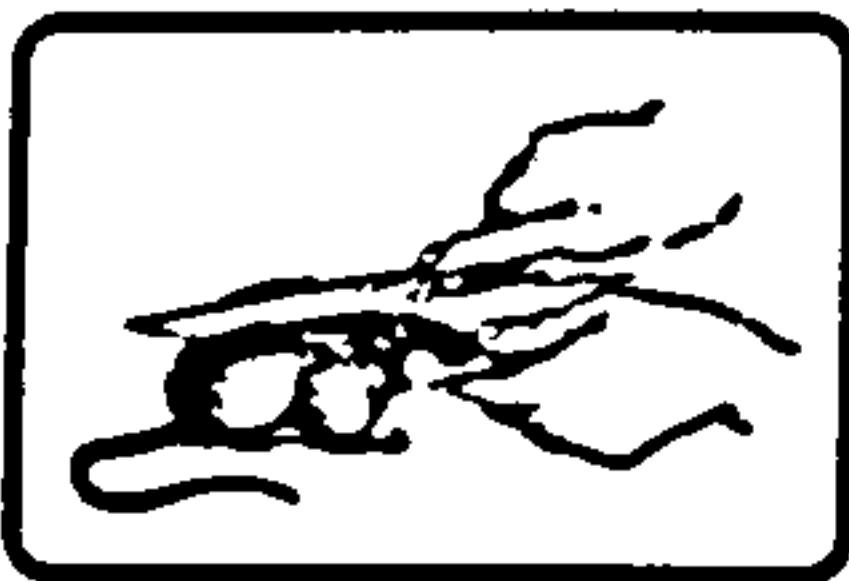
*Because they run too fast and they scare me!*

Q. Why do they scare you?

*They go too fast! I suppose it's you can't control them.*

## 15. Monty Python's rat recipes

### Rat Recipes



#### Rat pie:

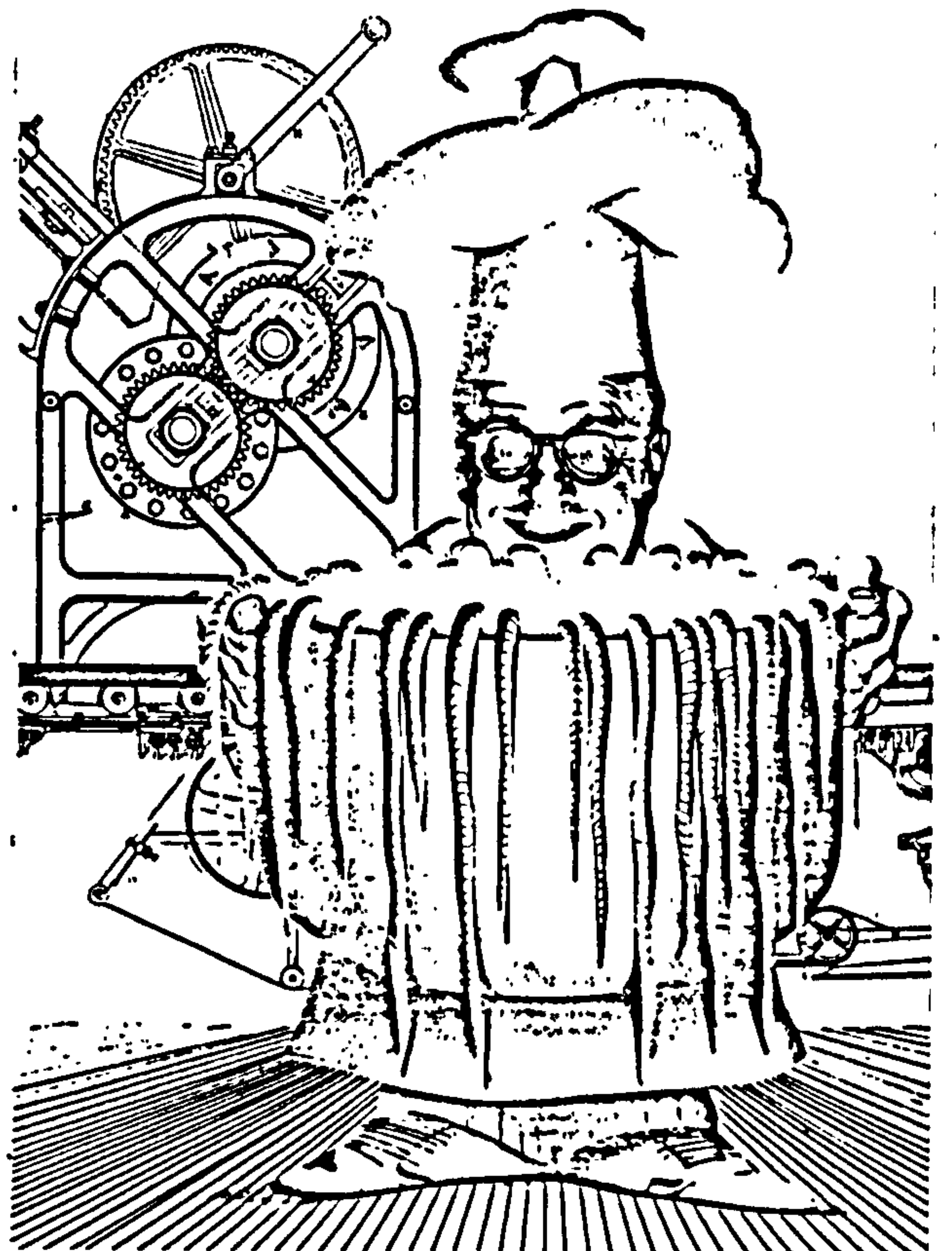
Take four medium-sized rats and lay them on the chopping board. Having first made sure the chopper is freshly sharpened, raise it as high above the first rat as you can. Make sure that the rat's neck is well exposed, then bring the chopper down with as much force as possible onto the neck or head of the rat. Then cook it in a pie.

#### Rat soufflé:

Make sure that the rat's squeals are not audible from the street, particularly in areas where the Anti-Soufflé League and similar do-gooders are out to persecute the innocent pleasures of the table. Anyway, cut the rat down and lay it on the chopping-board. Raise the chopper high above your head, with the steel glinting in the setting sun, and then bring it down - wham! - with a vivid crunch - straight across the taut neck of the terrified rodent, and make it into a soufflé.

#### Bits of rat hidden under a chair:

This isn't so much a recipe as a bit of advice in the event of members of the Anti-Soufflé League or its simpering lackeys breaking into your flat. Your wife (or a friend's) should engage the pusillanimous toadies from the League in conversation, perhaps turning the chat to the price of corn and the terrible damage inflicted by all kinds of rodents on personal property, and rats attacking small babies (this always takes the steam out of them) and you should have time to get any rat-bits safely out of sight. Incidentally do make sure that your current copy of *The Rat Gourmet* hasn't been left lying around, otherwise all will be in vain, and the braying hounds of the culinary killjoys will be unleashed upon the things you cherish: your chopping-board, the chopper caught in the blood-red glare of the fading sun. Bring it down - crunch! The slight splintering of tiny spinal column under the keen metal! The last squeal and the death twitches of the helpless rat!



Each case dealt with in this chapter has shared the common attribute of being in some way ambiguous in our system of classifying the living world, particularly with respect



to what we normally prefer to regard as the absolute distinction between the civilised human domain, and the wild residual category. Pets, primates, carnivores, rodents — all are avoided as food, since all are of uncertain identity. It may have been left to Mary Douglas to formally explain the correlation between purity and clearly ordered classification but, as one informant recalls, it is a lesson which many of us are taught from an early age:

*That's what my mother told me: never eat anything unless you know what it is.*



# 10

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## The Joy of Sex

Man is the hunter; woman is his game.  
The sleek and shining creature of the chase,  
We hunt them for the beauty of their skins;  
They love us for it and we ride them down.

TENNYSON, *THE PRINCESS*

In all cases the climax of the hunt was the death of the hunted animal, for, as Montaigne observed, to hunt without killing was like having sexual intercourse without orgasm.

THOMAS, 1983: 146

ALEX COMFORT M.D. subtitles his bestselling *Joy of Sex: A Gourmet Guide to Lovemaking* (1974) — alluding to the American cookery bible, *The Joy of Cooking* — and continues the theme by ordering his chapters like a menu: “Starters”, “Main Courses”, “Sauces and Pickles”, and so on. In so doing he continues a global tradition of associating sexual behaviour with eating. Those who have noticed how widespread such associations are commonly attribute the phenomenon to their equivalence as fundamental human drives:

Traditionally, hunger is seen as a basic drive for survival of the individual whilst sex is a basic drive for survival of the species. It might be expected that there could be found some parallels and interactions between these fundamental activities (Fieldhouse, 1986: 173).



"Natural" analogies between sex and eating — that both perform necessary survival functions, that both may be pleasurable, and that both imply vulnerability by breaching normal bodily boundaries — may be partly responsible for their association. Indeed, that each should carry a multiplicity of meanings extending beyond their respective provinces is perhaps not surprising; what is significant is the nature of associations made between the two sets of ideas.

It is important not to confuse *sex* with *gender* in this context. As Ortner & Whitehead have made clear, "What gender is, what men and women are, what sorts of relations do or should obtain between them — all of these notions do not simply reflect or elaborate upon biological 'givens,' but are largely products of social and cultural processes" (1981: 1). Eating and sex are natural functions, whilst food selection and sexuality are cultural constructions; the two spheres are related but must also be distinguished.

Many writers suggest the social to be modelled on the natural. Audrey Richards, for example, writes that nutrition "as a biological process is more fundamental than sex [and] determines more largely than any other physiological function the nature of social groupings, and the form their activities take" (1932: 1). Edmund Leach similarly suggests that cultural classificatory systems are structured on the basis of their functional equivalents:

Anthropologists have noted again and again that there is a universal tendency to make ritual and verbal associations between eating and sexual intercourse. It is thus a plausible hypothesis that the way in which animals are categorised with regard to edibility will have some correspondence to the way in which human beings are categorised with regard to sex relations (Leach, 1964: 53).

He proceeds to parallels between, for example, close members of each category, such as sisters with whom sex is incestuous and pets that are inedible, and distant members such as strangers with whom sex is not possible and wild animals which are also deemed inedible. He adds that the fact that:

this correspondence between the categories of sexual accessibility and the categories of edibility is rather more than just an accident is shown by a further accident of a linguistic kind. The archaic legal expression for game was beasts of venery. The term venery had the alternative meanings, hunting and sexual indulgence (1964: 54).



In this chapter I suggest that the association of hunting and sexual indulgence (by men) is indeed more than accidental but that this connection points to more than a curious feature of structural linguistics. It illustrates a basic aspect of masculine thought. In the traditional male cosmology, which emphasises the supreme value of prodigious power, women and nature have been regarded as analogous threats to his dominance.

THE ASSOCIATION OF HUNTING particularly with males is by no means uniquely Western. Collier and Rosaldo found "unexpected regularities in the gender conceptions of several ('simple') societies", particularly that "Man the Hunter, which we thought to be our myth, turned out to characterize their conception of maleness... Thus, real experience confirms ritual statements that male potency organizes and maintains the world — because men do articulate their claims to wives in terms of hunting skills and violent feats" (Collier & Rosaldo, 1981: 275, 317). This observation can be made the world over. Men are routinely in a position of controllers, hunters, providers, with first claim on available resources.

For the Masai youth, for example, the transition to adulthood is marked by private meat-feasts with his junior warrior age-mates, around the time of circumcision. At his second such occasion he brings a goat which is shared by all, after they have washed him in its blood. Thereafter he is considered sexually mature and a full warrior (Jacobs, 1958: 7). Amongst the !Kung too, men's rituals celebrate Man the Hunter. Women are formally excluded since, it is claimed, "femaleness negates hunting prowess" (Marshall, 1976: 177). A !Kung boy is likely to kill his first animal between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, whereafter he is considered eligible for marriage (Shostak, 1983: 85). Men are said to chase, kill and eat women, just as they do animals, and "a boy who has never killed any large meat animal would not be given a wife" (Marshall, 1976: 270). Hunting is thus ritually linked with marriage and it is suggested that wives are acquired through hunting prowess. Similarly, with the Sharanahua, in north-east Peru, Siskind reports that:

Pride in hunting is a benefit to the society, and it is rewarded, less today than it used to be, by prestige. Prestige accrues to the generous hunter, not to one who hoards and hides his game. Prestige is not a vague goal at Marcos; it brings a definite reward, the possibility of gaining women as lovers and/or wives. It is a common feature that the Sharanahua share with all tropical forest hunters: The successful hunter is usually the winner in the competition for women (Siskind, 1973: 95-96).



And in another quite different environment, amongst the Chipewyan of northern Canada, Sharp describes a rigid division of labour where hunting is an exclusively male preserve, whilst women cook or dry the meat or fish (Sharp, 1981).

MAN THE HUNTER LIVES ON IN BRITAIN, if in a somewhat impoverished form. Clear similarities exist between the terminology of the British meat system and a terminology widely used of women in pornographic and mainstream discourse. It is as if the one system of exploitation is in some way modelled on the other, which, I will suggest, is not far from the truth. The phenomenon is worth considering at some length since it is a principle metaphorical use of the concept of meat in the English language, developing upon its normal implication of strength, power, or challenge.

It is perhaps in the context of everyday masculine language that such associations are most striking. Women are birds, or chicks, or old mares; a man might reckon her to be tasty or delicious, and perhaps fancy a nibble; she can be ridden like a horse, or sensually devoured; she can be bridled, and married to a groom; in any case, what he is after is a bit of flesh for "beefing" in order to satisfy his sexual appetite, if he is "hungry for love" in the words of a recent popular song. She is a chick, a bird, a tasty morsel, or simply meaty. One tabloid newspaper's "exclusive" about a Macdonalds security man, for example, reports:

"Burger boss tells his new 15-stone bride: Lose any weight and I divorce you"...

Cuddly wife Ann has promised she won't fall even a quarter pounder because he loves his women beefy...

"I can't stand skinny dolly birds. Girls with meat on them make much better lovers" (*The Sun*, 4 Nov. 1987: 13).

To obtain his woman, the man goes to a "cattle-market", or out "on the hunt" to make a "catch". Alternatively he may use the financial power which historically has been reserved largely for males to pay for a woman "on the game" — a name which combines affirmation of a woman's status as the man's plaything with evocation of her comparability to the "sportsman's" quarry. Patricia Pullar, for example, notes that a "certain type [of restaurant customer] will deliberately pick the most expensive items on the menu. This is an interesting parallel with a prostitute; a man must *pay* for her company" (Pullar, 1970: 231). Or perhaps he is content with her "raw", "juicy", or



"succulent" flesh displayed in magazines such as *Rustler* (a name which means "cattle thief"). In the first Reader's Letter in one such magazine, for example, Jack of Torquay relates an incident from his regular weekend pastime of skeet shooting:

Well, one Sunday I was shooting driven grouse... when to my horror I heard a scream from the woods, coming from the direction where I fired my last volley.

I ran along to where I thought the sound had come from, and there, sitting on a log, was a young lady...

Incredibly, she was unscathed — but for a piece of buckshot, lodged just beneath her skin, right between her breasts.

The only apparent method of removal is for Jack to suck out the offending buckshot, which seems to arouse the young woman:

"You can shag me if you want," she said, dabbing the tiny trickle of blood that trickled down her cleavage with a tissue. "My husband's been away for three weeks and I'm desperate!" (*Parade*, Issue 83: 12).

The imagery could not be more clear, and is entirely consistent with the system of ideas in masculine thought whereby women are portrayed as Man the Hunter's willing prey. In similar vein, the so-called office wolf, or the wolf-whistles inflicted upon passing women by the stereotypical workman, are appropriately designated in view of the predatory relationships conveyed. The entire system operates as if women are perceived by men to be analogous to hunted, or else farmed, meat. Her body parts, portioned into the same names as the animals on a supermarket shelf — leg, thigh, rump and breast — are the basis of much of the innuendo-humour that fills the airwaves each evening, and innocent mention of which names at table brings a blush to the faces of pubescent schoolboys. The humour or embarrassment takes effect by conjuring up images of women through the metaphor of meat, symbolically affirming their status in relation to men.

The sexual asymmetry is made clear if we consider the situation transposed, as if it were men's bodies which were symbolically apportioned for consumption. With the exception of certain anomalous instances mentioned later, men are almost never so described in the mainstream media of discourse, since masculine values dominate the cultural agenda. Men find little humour in having their thighs or breasts compared to those of, say, a chicken, as just another object of consumption, so such references are simply not made. The joke about women is, however, readily understood. It is accepted because the idea exists already in the mind.



16. Images associating women with meat are common



Source: "Miss Steak" (left) — *Observer* magazine, 8 May 1988

Her position is defined relatively to his. As shown in Chapter 5, hunting is a primary characteristic whereby humanity is held to have first demonstrated — and for some still demonstrates — its civilised elevation above nature. And hunting is, of course, a male pursuit. Rosaldo & Atkinson, investigating the idea of "Man the Hunter and Woman", believe it can be assumed that to some extent "men and women are defined everywhere in relation to one another" (1975: 44), and Edwin Ardener argues that, as societies have always been observed to be to a greater or lesser extent patriarchal, the dominant indigenous model by which perhaps all cultures define and indeed create themselves, bounded against nature, is *inevitably* a male model, which effectively relegates important elements of female identity to wild nature:

The objective basis of the symbolic distinction between nature and society... is a result of the problem of accommodating the two logical sets which classify human beings by different bodily structures: 'male'/'female'; with the two other sets: 'human'/'non-human'. It is, I have suggested, men who usually face this problem, and, because their model for *mankind* is based on that for *man*, their opposites, *women* and *non-mankind* (the wild), tend to be ambiguously



placed... Women accept the implied symbolic content by equating *womankind* with the men's wild (Ardener, 1975: 14).

As already noted, the nature-culture dichotomy is fundamental to recent (largely masculine) Western traditions. It is one of many such dichotomies in our thought, just as most human societies use binary systems with little overlap to classify their worlds (Needham, ed., 1973). Since theorising on the nature of the world in which we live has been predominantly the domain of middle or upper class European males, it is perhaps unsurprising that the following pairs should have come to be widely associated, as upper and lower, in both common and scientific thought (Birke, 1986: 109-110):

culture	nature
man	woman
Europeans	non-Europeans
humans	animals
upper/middle class	working class

As Birke points out, whilst "many such dichotomies might be demonstrated in Western thought, it is important to note that associations tend to be made on one side of the dichotomy; thus non-white people are associated with proximity to animals and to nature" (1986: 111) — or, as John Lennon puts it, "woman is the nigger of the world". Women are equated with nature and with animals; men are powerful, human, and civilised.

Thus we see that the argument proposed earlier, that human society has exhibited a consistent disposition to define itself as distinct from, and normally superior to, the rest of the natural world is now shown to be too general a statement, for different groups, including men and women, enter differentially into the debate, both in terms of ideas held, and in terms of access to the media of communication. Birke discusses at length the:

gender-related dichotomy... of nature versus culture, a distinction which has become central to Western ideas about the natural world and about humanity's place within it. "Nature" is often regarded as somehow disorderly, chaotic and intractable; by contrast, our concept of "culture" has come to include the capacity for human mastery over nature. Science, too, is implicitly part of that distinction, for it is science that has long promised to give us mastery over our environment, to force nature to yield up "her" secrets. In the twentieth century, indeed, concepts such as "progress" and "culture" have become almost synonymous with those of science and technology (Birke, 1986: 107).

Thus civilisation has been usurped as a male prerogative whereas woman remains closer to nature — an identity perhaps highlighted by her more obvious biological functions



such as menstruation and child-bearing (Ortner, 1982: 492). It is significant, for example, that the psychoanalyst Guy-Gillet (1981) should argue that the blood spilled by the male butcher-priest in animal sacrifice has symbolic linkages with the menstrual blood of women, the symbolic victims of man's aggressiveness and devouring lust. And in Victorian England it was widely believed that women should not cure hams whilst menstruating. "In 1878 a correspondence struck up in the *British Medical Journal* describing incidents when meat being rubbed with brine by ladies during those seasons had not taken the salt and turned bad" (Pullar, 1970: 189). Whatever its supposed reason, each case affirms women's supposedly more profane existence, as opposed to men's sacred gentility.

Woman is depicted not only as meat for man's sexual consumption; this is but one aspect of her animal identity in our enduringly patriarchal society. She might equally be a pet — as a bunny-girl, as a sex-kitten, or just as pussy, for example — to be looked after and played with. Or she might be a vixen, or a cow, or a dog, or even a catty bitch. As Susan Griffin points out:

pornography is filled with associations between women and animals. We see a film in which women become animals, who are then trained with a whip. Juvenal tells us that a woman filled with sexual desire becomes 'more savage than a tigress that lost her cubs.' In *Hustler* magazine, a woman is photographed surrounded by the mounted heads of wild animals and animal skins. She opens her legs toward a live lion and touches her own breasts. Over the photograph we read that 'Lea' has shed 'the veneer of civilization for the honesty of wild animal passions.' 'The beast in her,' we are told, 'is unleashed.' Projecting even the mechanism of his own projection of her, the pornographer writes: 'She sees in wild creatures her own primitive lusts and desires, and she satisfies them with the uninhibited speed of a beast in heat.' And in the midst of several photographs of nude women who lie with their legs apart, revealing their vulvas, we find, in the same magazine, a photograph of a male lion, on his back, his legs, also, spread apart (Griffin, 1981: 24-5).

Griffin demonstrates the ubiquity of such oppressive images not only in what we call pornography, but in the art of Ramos, Tauzin, Milet, and others, and the parallel equation of womanhood and brute nature in the work of such figures as Jung, who finds the African woman more female than "civilized women"; Schopenhauer, who argues that women exist solely to propagate the species; Hegel, who writes that women cannot comprehend abstract ideas; and Augustine, who says that "nothing brings the manly mind down from the heights more than a woman's carresses" (Griffin, 1981 26-27). Each example cited is, of course, a man, for it is men who dominate the agenda around which most of the official discourse of our society is oriented. Men have predominantly controlled education and information, law and its enforcement, marriage and alliance, production and



distribution, science and technology. It is men who have set the agenda, and men who have ideologically established their own group as the axis of civilisation.

#### 17. Cartoon without caption



Source *Playboy*, August 1963: 50-51

It is as if nature and women have been seen as twin threats to this supreme masculine power. On the one hand the untamed natural environment has been a physical challenge, whilst, in the cultural environment, women have evaded total masculine control. To the first is applied science and technology (which historically have been the almost exclusive preserve of men); to the other a range of legal, social and economic constraints, and "power-structured relationships" including the "ultimate weapon" of rape (Brownmiller, 1975), which are together described as "sexual politics" (Millett, 1977: 23). One such ideological constraint is the consigning of women to the category of the wild: to Mother Nature.

MEN ARE ALSO verbally and ritually associated with meat in some contexts, but normally in a quite different way than women. If men are referred to as meaty or beefy ("he's a real beefsteak") the equation is not so much with meat as a food, but is rather between the strength endowed by meat and his supposed sexual and physical potency. The muscularity that meat is reputed to endow is a popular masculine ideal. In the language of structuralism, it might be said that the conventional linguistic relationship of women to meat is metaphorical, whilst that of men is more often metonymical. In other words, men are meat in the sense that meat is full of power, whereas women are meat in the sense that it is consumed as a statement of power. In the illustration below, for example, the woman's



lips are formed into a shape more suited to a sexual act than to taking a large bite out of the meat on offer.

18. Men's meat is the *source* of their power



The orthodox associations of masculine meatiness provides the basis for a semi-humorous newspaper item reporting a link-up between the publishers, Mills & Boon, and a meat firm which was packaging a free romantic novel with every 3lb of frozen sausage rolls sold (*The Independent*, 22. Dec. 1987):

Whether the heroine of Model of Deception would find the thought of thawing sausage rolls attractive is another matter.

In the words of the author, she preferred to discover that "red hot blood had begun pouring through her veins. She couldn't be sure, of course... It must have been a trick, due to the sun perhaps, rather than Luke's overpowering masculinity."

All in all, a less prosaic defrosting process.

Presumably, had the heroine in question been offered proper red meat, she might have been better satisfied, gastronomically if not sexually. The symbolic statement made by mere sausage rolls, however, is somewhat incongruous, failing to adequately represent the object of her passionate-yet-innocent desires.

Only in exceptional circumstances, when normal values are otherwise inverted in any case, the rule of not referring to men as meat for consumption may occasionally be contravened. In this somewhat subtle reference to meat-eating, the title serves to underline



the abnormality of a situation in modern American society in which women can publicly command control of men's bodies by the use of money — the inversion of a privilege normally reserved for men:

**Meat-eating in the States.**

When Sue Ellen raised money for good causes in *Dallas*, it was *never* like this.

The "exciting new way for single yuppie women and desirable bachelors to meet" has been launched on the innocent American public. The bodies of 39 eligible bachelors are being auctioned off this week. Former Redskins champion Babe Laugenberg, congressmen, and an ex-Mr Unique Physique are up for grabs, profits to go to a Washington charity for underprivileged children. The men will be available to the highest bidder — for an evening, or possibly for an overnight stay. Once sold, they may not say no (*The Independent*, 5. May 1987).

In each of the following examples, similarly, the humour derives from violation of the principle that men are not normally meat to be eaten — and particularly not his penis, for which meat is a regular synonym:

I was eating a can of frankfurters and growing very weary of the demands from one of the onlookers for a share of my meal. When he finally asked what I was eating, I replied: 'Beef'. He then asked... 'What part of the animal are you eating?' To which I replied, 'Guess'. He muttered a contemptuous epithet, but stopped asking for a share (Chagnon, 1968: 14).

I'll tell you a story which is beastly — but will make you laugh; — a young man at Ferrara detected his sister amusing herself with a Bologna Sausage — he said nothing — but perceiving the same Sausage presented at table — he got up — made a low bow — and exclaimed 'Vi riverisco mio Cognato' [I pay my respects to my brother-in-law] (Byron, cited Bold, 1980: 182).

Media historians will probably say this was the year when naked sex objects became respectable on British screens.

They will of course be talking about condoms. Your modest rubber johnnies went far in 1987. They were demonstrated on fingers and on plaster phalluses, they were recommended by Geldof — "Don't forget, stick one of these on yer dick." They were, hell's bells, advertised. They went all the way from derided options to medical necessities to comedy prop. There was Michael Palin on the David Letterman late night chat show stuffing one with fresh minced beef and slicing it salami-fashion. A Freudian frisson shook the land (Hugh Hebert, "The naked and the dead". *The Guardian*, 31. Dec. 1987).

The penis is often referred to as a man's sausage, usually in one of two contexts. Men tend to make such verbal "links" exclusively in humour, where values can safely be transposed, as if to mitigate the potential ambiguity of the association. When women talk of men's sausages, however, the tone is more often mocking, chiding male arrogance by



inverting the normal masculine system of ideas to invoke the notion of meat for consumption by women rather than by men, implying male vulnerability and, indeed, lack of virility or prestige. Rather than the potent red-blooded beefsteak as which the man might choose to see himself, he is derided as the possessor of nothing more than a mere sausage.

IN BRITISH SOCIETY, the genders are conventionally allotted very different roles in the food system. Women are generally expected to provide, cook, and serve food domestically, but men are still in some respects the ritual providers of meat, as if to fulfil their proverbial rôle as the hunter. In fact Jack Goody argues that:

In human societies generally cooking is seen as part of women's role. That is not to deny that men may carry out other functions in the preparation of food. They are generally the killers of other animals (and of other men) as well as the butchers of domestic meat. Moreover, they often play a part in the roasting as distinct from the boiling of meat, in cooking in the fields or forest as distinct from the house, and in ritual as distinct from profane cooking (Goody, 1982: 71).

In traditional British households the purchase of a proper piece of meat may still be seen as the model duty of the man of the house, particularly for special occasions, ritually affirming his status. Men may be our traditional breadwinners but conventionally they do not actually buy the bread; they provide the resources with which it can be purchased. Even today, however, it may still be men who bring home the proverbial bacon: who notionally provide the meat. Just as with the !Kung and the Sharanahua, it is still our men who are the purported hunters and providers of meat, and women who "forage" for the rest of the food. As one retired couple recount:

*HELEN Yes, that's the one thing I leave to John. At the weekend, you'll go out, won't you, and find us something nice for our Sunday lunch.*

*JOHN Well, not every Saturday. Often we'll just have a chicken or something to ourselves, but if the children are coming down then we'll usually try to see that there's something proper for them, so that's usually my job — to pick up a good looking roast or something — while Helen does the other bits.*

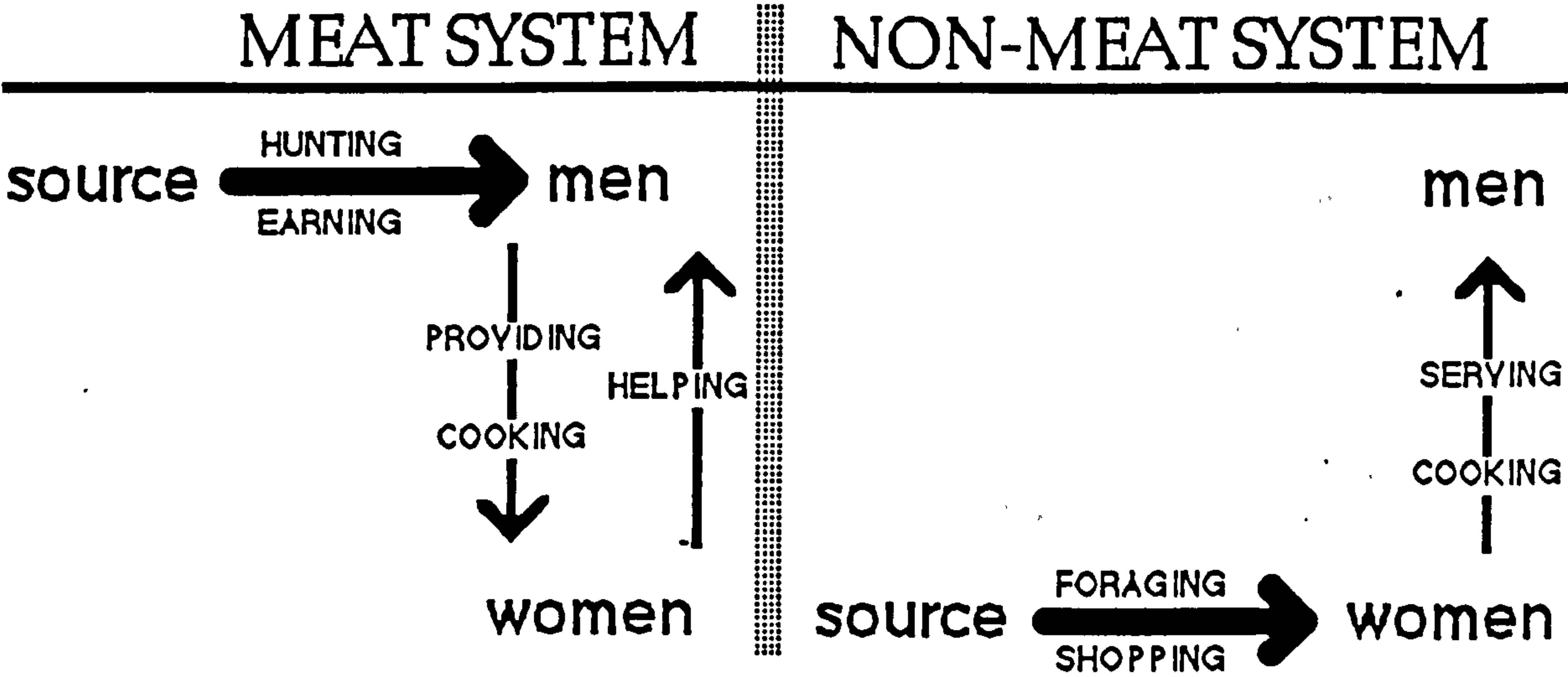
*HELEN And you usually find us something good, don't you?*

The fashionable garden or beach barbecue is one arena where the man is likely to take control, peculiarly evoking the "fields and forest" mentioned by Goody. In the home the man may also be responsible for the roasting of a piece of meat, and particularly its carving — a significant activity for the male to have annexed, given its display of symbolic



mastery whilst being devoid of any real requirement for skill or courage. It might indeed seem an enigma, if the cooking of meat is the important cultural signal of human civilisation suggested, that women are permitted to take on the task of cooking meat at all. The resolution is to note that it is only in routine and mundane situations that this obtains — it is the drudgery that is delegated to women; the prestige still accrues to the man. The routes by which meat and non-meat nominally move from shop to table in our society are quite dissimilar:

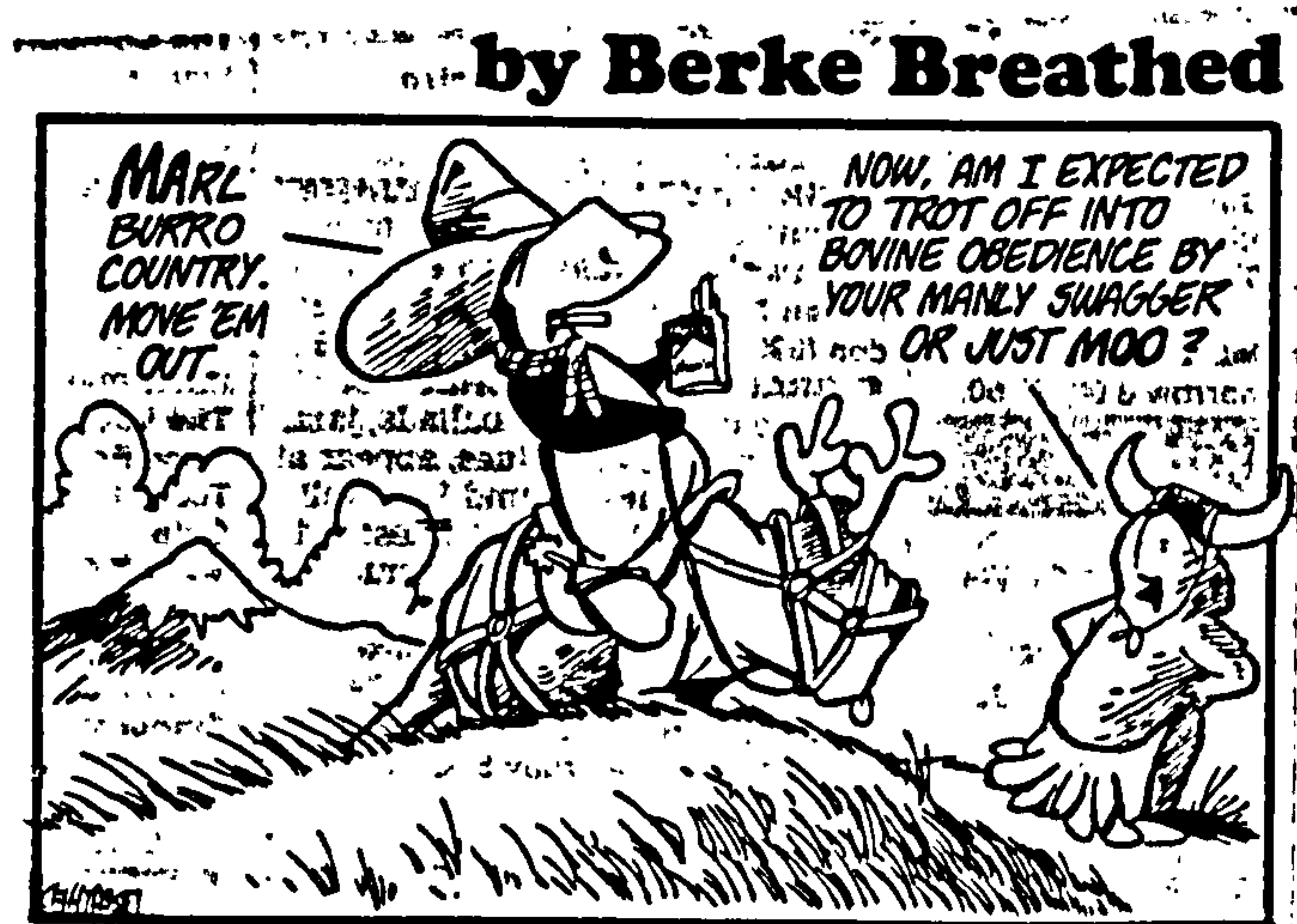
Fig 5: Meat and non-meat in the British food system.



It is significant that the top chefs over the years have almost exclusively been male, and that whilst those chefs may have many assistants male and female, the assistants are assigned the tasks of preparing vegetables, making sauces, making sweets and starters, washing dishes, cooking vegetables... but the chef generally takes charge of the *pièce de résistance*: the meat. At the pinnacle of food provision men still stand as figureheads.



19. Control of meat and of animals is ultimately a male domain



THE MACHO STEAK is only the most visible manifestation of an idea that permeates the entire food system: that meat (and especially red meat) is a masculine food. This notion is essential to a humorous book about gender-stereotypes which enjoyed brief celebrity in the early 1980s, and whose title, *Real Men Don't Eat Quiche*, still circulates as a catchphrase:

In the restaurant, Real Men eat steak and chips... Real men never eat the compulsory sprig of watercress... In general, Real Men are not afraid of food. They do not flinch nervously at the sight of butter, white bread and refined sugar. They know that all proper meals are centred round meat, that yogurt is really milk that's gone off, muesli is some sort of chicken feed and salad is for rabbits (Feirstein, 1982: 72, 74).

Even in this whimsical context, it is instructive to note the association drawn between Real Men's high consumption of red meat and, according to the following introductory passage, his intrinsically destructive tendencies towards the natural environment:

'Real men don't eat quiche,' said Flex Crush, ordering a breakfast of steak, prime rib, six eggs, and a loaf of toast.

We were sitting in the professional drivers' section of an all-night truckers' pit stop somewhere west of Tulsa on Interstate-44, discussing the plight of men in today's society. Flex, a 225-pound nuclear-waste driver who claims to be one of the last Real Men in existence, was pensive:

'American men are all mixed up today,' he began, idly cleaning the 12-gauge shotgun that was sitting across his knees. Off in the distance, the sun was just beginning to rise over the tractor trailers in the parking lot.

There was a time when this was a nation of Ernest Hemingways. *Real Men*. The kind of guys who could defoliate an entire forest to make a breakfast fire — and then go on to wipe out an endangered species hunting for lunch. But not



anymore. We've become a nation of wimps. Pansies. Quiche eaters' (Feirstein, 1982): 8).

As the epitome of meat, a beef steak can send powerful sexual signals. It is conventional that the larger and juicier the piece of meat, the more red-blooded and virile the consumer should be supposed to be, and a steak by candlelight is also commonly seen as an appropriate prelude to seduction. Meat is widely reputed to inflame the lustful passions, particularly in men, the stimulation being generally of an animal rather than of an erotic kind; nor is it usually an aphrodisiac or specific against failing libido (Twigg, 1983: 24). It is reported, for example, that the captain of a slave ship, whilst in the throes of evangelical conversion, stopped eating meat to prevent his lusting after the female slaves (Cecil, 1929: 118). Nineteenth, and even twentieth, century educationalists recommended a low meat diet for male adolescents to stop them from masturbating (Miles, 1904; Punch, 1977). The association even turns up in academic literature. In surveying the nutritional superiority of meat, Harris notes that animal foods have been reported to be "good-to-excellent sources of zinc, essential for male fertility" (1986: 36); once again it is significant that it is particularly male potency which is advantaged. Conversely, a male vegetarian can be a suspect figure, as a student recalls of a period living in a new community:

*It was really odd, they seemed to automatically assume that because I was vegetarian then I must be gay. I'm sure it was because of the thing about meat being a sort of virility symbol. And then of course, it wasn't helped by the fact that I was living in a house with a woman who wasn't my girlfriend — they couldn't really comprehend that either.*

Another male informant expresses much the same idea, if as a joke:

Q. Tell me, what do you feel about vegetarians? Why is it becoming fairly popular?

*CLIVE Oh, they're just a bunch of cranks! And they should be lined up and shot, along with the poofs... [laughs]. Er, what do I think? I think they're human beings. They're perfectly entitled to do what they wish...*

Indeed, the same informant projects similar values onto (quasi-human) pets, when his wife mentions a visit to her aunt abroad:

*PAT Yes, I mean, even the dogs were vegetarian, it was that... she was that bad about it. She had a strong belief in it rather. The dogs were perfectly healthy though; the two dogs were terrific, and were 100% vegetarian. She did not let them have meat.*

*CLIVE God, their street-cred must have been absolutely the pits. Can you imagine going out with the lads, you know: "Come on, lets go and ravage a few cats" — "I'm sorry, I'm not into cats: any mushrooms we can ravage?" Woof!*



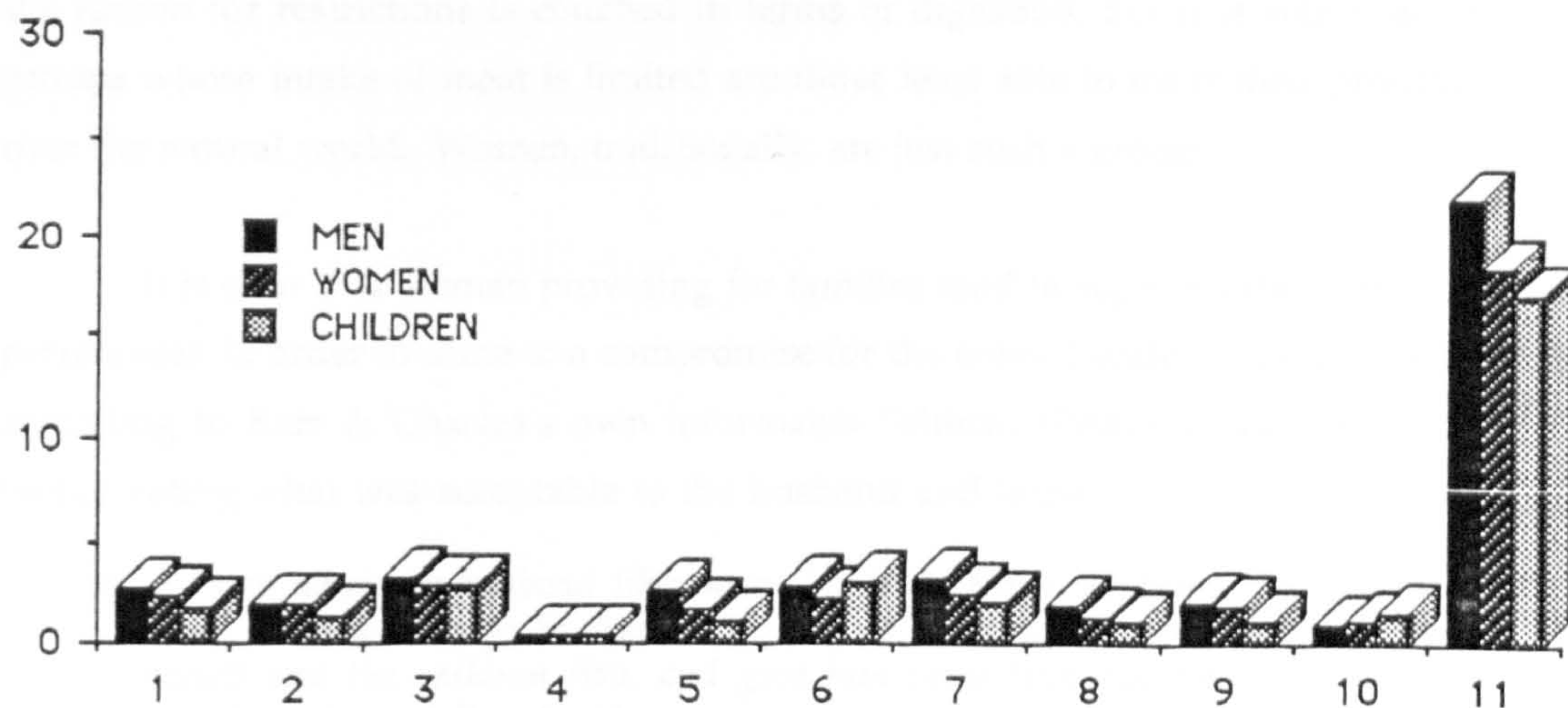
The inequality of the genders is institutionalised in many ways. Men have long been allocated an unequal proportion of available food, and particularly meat. In the working class home at the beginning of this century, for example, a series of reprinted contemporaneous reports show that men were consistently given the "lion's share" (Pember Reeves, 1979; Spring Rice, 1981; Rowntree, 1913; Co-operative Women's Guild, 1978). Documenting this phenomenon, Kerr & Charles comment that:

Women, on whose shoulders fell the responsibility for managing the limited household budget and for ensuring that the family was adequately fed, frequently did without food themselves in order that their husbands and children were less likely to go short. Men's food needs were often privileged because of the necessity of keeping them fit for waged work... (Kerr & Charles, 1986: 116).

However, this pattern of maternal self-sacrifice has continued to be found in later poverty studies (Land, 1969; Marsden, 1973) and it appears clear that fathers' and children's needs are consistently put before those of women themselves" to this day (Kerr & Charles, 1986: 116). Within this study of 150 families, men generally ate more meat than either women or children. The only exceptions were such low status meats as sausages on which children were fed, and also low status fish products, of which both women and children consumed more than men. Average consumption was as follows:

**Fig 6:** *Av. consumption of meat and fish over a two week period (oz.)*

(After Kerr & Charles, 1986: 142)



**KEY:**

1: High status meat (Joint, Steak, Chops); 2: Fowl; 3: Medium status meat (Stewing meat, mince); 4: Offal; 5: Bacon; 6: Low status meat (Beefburgers, Sausages); 7: Sliced Cold Meats, luncheon meat, etc; 8: Meat pies, Cornish Pasties, Sausage rolls; 9: Fish; 10: Fish fingers, fishcakes; 11: All meat and fish.



Overall, Kerr & Charles report that:

meat consumption was generally high for all men in employment at the time of the study, regardless of the nature of their occupation, and these men almost without exception consumed meat more often than their wives while children almost always consumed meat less often than adults in these families. Very high consumption of meat was almost totally confined to men while very low meat consumption was confined to women and children (Kerr & Charles, 1986: 145).

It is appropriate that children should, like women, have been allocated a lesser amount of meat than grown men. Meat is the food of those who control the natural environment: who do what is regarded by many men as the real work, as opposed to women's domestic chores. Thus there is a tradition that less active members of society should eat less meat. Children are traditionally given special food, such as sausages, whilst their parents — and especially their father — enjoys a piece of real meat. The classic nursery diet is for bland food, with little or no red meat. If animal flesh is given to children, it is in its milder forms: boiled or stewed, never roasted. Invalids too are commonly restricted to such a diet, their constitutions reputedly being unable to deal with "stronger" items. It has even been recommended that those engaged in bookish or sedentary occupations avoid excess consumption of red meat since it is said to stimulate the passions, so that unhealthy frustration is a probable consequence for those unable to dissipate through physical exercise the ardour it engenders (Twigg, 1983: 25). In each case the reason for restrictions is couched in terms of digestion, but it is significant that the groups whose intake of meat is limited are those least able to exert their physical power over the natural world. Women, traditionally, are just such a group.

It is clear that women providing for families tend to suppress their own tastes and preferences, in order to come to a compromise for the entire family — compromises which, according to Kerr & Charles's own informants "almost always entailed the rest of the family eating what was acceptable to the husband and father":

*Well, I know what my husband likes now, I wouldn't buy anything that my husband hated, I mean I know he doesn't like fish so I wouldn't go out and buy, well, myself and the children fish, and give him something else because I think it would be financially stupid...*

*Well, it's got to be something that Malcolm likes really. He's not a fussy eater but he prefers plain, you know, old-fashioned cooking, I suppose. Like every week I buy a joint, a big joint for Sunday and then I'll try and buy a smaller piece of meat to make a mid-week joint. He likes mince and onions and carrots and*



*stewing meat and kidney, he'll have that for another night. It's the same every week you know, he's not a one for fancy cooking at all. If I put a lasagne in front of him he'd throw it at me, y'know. He likes pork chops, chicken and fish, and that usually makes the seven days up.*

"Thus, while women choose the food, their choice is largely dictated by men's food preferences. Most men were reported as being unadventurous eaters and it is clear that the importance men commonly attach to a plain and solid meal which includes plenty of meat severely restricts the variety which may be offered in the family diet" (Kerr & Charles, 1986: 120-121). They stress that unequal distribution of food within the family is not necessarily backed by forceful, or even overt, demands:

In fact the women often commented that they attempted to gain help in decision-making about food purchase by asking their husbands for ideas but this was usually met with the response that 'anything' will do. Knowledge of men's preferences had been gained through a process of trial and error in the early stages of marriage and men had made their preferences clear through refusal or reluctance to eat food at the point it was presented to them. The strength of this sanction lay in the fact that it was likely to inspire concern and even guilt in the women as provider of food. One woman recounted her response to an occasion when her husband refused a meal thus:

*'I felt pretty hurt about it really. I mean I didn't feel insulted. I felt a bit hurt... not hurt, guilty. I suppose I felt a bit guilty because he was going without a proper meal, I suppose that's what I felt really' (Kerr & Charles, 1986: 121).*

The inequality is rationalised by the women in Kerr & Charles's study with recourse to the natural equation between males and activity; men are portrayed as more active than women, and boys than girls, and thus require more meat. Acceptance of the inequity of such unequal distribution was a "bone of contention" for one woman employed as personnel manager by a large industrial firm:

*The personnel manager tagged on at the end of the management line, and our fish was hotter than in the workers' canteen. But I had to turn on my own management, who were all men, and say that it wasn't right that the others should get their food colder and when there's only smaller pieces of fish left. But it was no use sitting down with the union, because the union man got his large haddock as well! You sometimes felt so naive trying to pursue that. It was somehow very important: giving the meat to the men. And the girls actually letting it happen...*

But the girls do let it happen. The male model of culture is by no means entirely opposed to women's ideas. Women, as Edwin Ardener suggests (1975: 14), accept much of the implied symbolic content of men's ideology, and incorporate it into their own — although women's valuations differ in detail considerably.



MEN'S CONCEPTIONS have dominated most of the discussion so far, but it is important to recognise that these are not the only possible views. The implication of the inevitable dominance of the archetypical masculine ideology (which is, of course, a descriptive device, and is not necessarily the same as all *men's* views), rests upon a presumption of the necessary dominance of patriarchy, although there are signs that women's views have been becoming increasingly influential in society as a whole. Rosaldo and Atkinson (1975: 63) argue that "celebration of motherhood and female sexuality implies a definition of womankind in terms of nature and biology; it traps women in their physical being, and thereby in the very general logic which declares them less capable of transcendence and cultural achievement than men". Their study of the Ingolot demonstrates, however, that it is possible for women to transcend the implication of inferiority and achieve largely equal status, as has demonstrably been the direction if not the final position of gender relations in recent Western history.

Although women's models are partly imposed on them by the dominant male ideology, it would also "be surprising if they bounded themselves against nature in the same way as men do" (Ardener, 1975: 5). Women's views are related but distinct. Indeed, in recent years some women have sought to make a virtue of this previously disadvantageous status, by not rejecting but extolling their notionally closer relationship with nature. That this is now possible is partly due to progress in the relative statuses of women and men, and women's increasing economic independence, and partly due to significant changes in attitudes to the natural world outlined in Chapters 7 and 8.

Ardener looks to the lore of mothers and old women (old wives' tales) for the symbolic valuations that enact "that female model of the world which has been lacking [in academic discourse], and which is different from the models of men in a particular dimension: the placing of the boundary between society and nature" (1975: 5). I suggest the evidence is also readily available in the beliefs and actions of women in ordinary situations. It is clear that women in our society do, on average, view themselves in a significantly different relationship with the non-human natural world than men. The extent to which this is the making of a virtue of necessity from a situation imposed upon women by the dominant masculine ideology is open to debate; the fact remains however that "woman" is seen as closer to nature, as more sympathetic, as less exploitative, not just



by men but by women themselves — as one female informant suggests as a reason for there being greater numbers of women vegetarians than men today, and another regards herself as unable to kill, even by necessity:

*But I think partly that's why women will be more interested... Do you reckon?... maybe because they care for the animals. I don't know. There's so many reasons why we do these things.*

JAMES Yes, erm... I think the answer to your question is that, Yes, we would go out and kill for survival. No problem.

ANNIE I couldn't kill it, but I could deal with it after it was dead. You'd have to kill it.

JAMES Hmm. No problem.

These cultural boundaries, both of the category we call men and that we call women, between each other and between them together and all else, are protected or "marked" by "taboo, ridicule, pollution, category inversion and the rest" (Ardener, 1975: 5). As already noted, in modern Britain, there is still a belief amongst both men and women that men require their meat, as this informant recalls:

*Actually getting the food kept hot for the women who came half an hour after the men was very difficult. It was a fight with the canteen manageress who was really just interested in feeding "her men", not the women.*

Sharanahua women, on the other hand, when they wish more meat, inaugurate a "special hunt", as part of a "socio-economic system in which sex is the incentive for hunting" (Siskind, 1973: 104). Each situation clearly delineates the male and female domains. The diversity of views of the correct relationship between men and women, and between humans and nature, from society to society may be great, but their effect is constant: to maintain stability in what is regarded as their natural order.

MALES DOMINATE THE OFFICIAL DISCOURSE of our society, and habitually associate women with meat. This is an instance of the wider caricature of woman as animal, but it is an especially significant example. Just as meat is a sign *par excellence* of man's control of the natural world, so woman as meat has been a particularly effective statement of both her wild nature, and her supposedly natural social rôle, available for the sexual pleasure and consumption of man-in-control.



The asymmetry of this subsystem of ideas is perhaps significant. Women are called meat as if to designate them as available for men's consumption, but the converse does not occur: meat is not usually characterised as feminine. Nature provides an extensive and detailed model for the system of patriarchal control of women, but not on the whole vice versa. This seems to undermine the arguments of theorists who hold that "radical feminist theory exposed the inadequacy of all previous work on power, in failing to analyse the domination of women as a central form" (Eisenstein, 1984: 131), and that "sexual domination obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power" (Millett, 1977: 25). This evidence rather suggests that domination of the natural world, as represented in the meat system, antecedes sexual domination, providing both a model and a metaphor for men's control. This system of thought, it seems, has a long history, but the twentieth century upsurge of interest in both feminism and environmentalism suggests that attitudes to proper relationships in both spheres may recently have been undergoing radical development.



# MEAT

## A NATURAL SYMBOL

### Meatologiques Modernes

CHAPTERS 11 TO 14 DESCRIBE OUR CONVENTIONAL EXPLANATIONS FOR THE STATUS OF MEAT AND ITS CHANGING EVALUATION. THESE HAVE A SIGNIFICANT METAPHORICAL COMPONENT WHICH IS OFTEN OVERLOOKED.

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FORMAL ECONOMICS CANNOT EXPLAIN THE VALUE WHICH WE ASCRIBE TO ANIMAL FLESH. ITS TECHNIQUES CAN ONLY BE USED FOR MEASUREMENT. THE VALUE OF MEAT IS NOT INHERENT IN THE SUBSTANCE, BUT REFLECTS OUR CULTURE'S IDEAS.

#### 12. Health ..... 207

FOR MANY YEARS MEAT ENJOYED AN UNRIVALLED REPUTATION FOR ITS NUTRITIONAL BENEFITS. RECENTLY, HOWEVER, HEALTH CONCERNS ABOUT IT HAVE MULTIPLIED. THIS CHANGE PARTLY REFLECTS CHANGING VIEWS OF THE VALUE OF HUMAN POWER THAT IT EMBODIES.

#### 13. Ethics & Religion..... 234

MEAT EATING HAS BECOME A MORAL ISSUE TO AN UNPRECEDENTED EXTENT IN OUR SOCIETY, REFLECTING A GRADUAL BROADENING OF MORAL CONSIDERATION. EVEN CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE HAS TRADITIONALLY CONDONED THE EXPLOITATION OF NATURE, BUT SHOWS SIGNS TOO OF ADOPTING A MORE EMPATHETIC POSITION.

#### 14. Ecology ..... 256

THE WIDE RANGE OF NEGATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF WHICH MEAT PRODUCTION IS ACCUSED MAY BE SCIENTIFICALLY ACCURATE. BUT MEAT'S INCRIMINATION IN ECOLOGICAL DAMAGE IS ALSO SYMBOLIC. SINCE MEAT STANDS FOR POWER OVER NATURE IT IS ALSO LINKED WITH INDUSTRIAL EXCESSES.



# 11

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## Economics

*On the question of cost too... My sister, who's vegetarian now — when she was a student it came about initially I think because they couldn't afford to buy meat, but then... I mean, they're both ecologists as well.*

THE MOST COMPREHENSIVE series of statistical surveys of vegetarianism in Britain published in recent years considered only cost and health as influences — the ethical dimension did not even figure in its circulated analysis of the public's given reasons for not eating meat (Realeat surveys, 1985-1988). The meat industry similarly stresses rational considerations of nutrition and price in its marketing. For example, when the Meat and Livestock Commission launched a three-year merchandising campaign at the end of 1987, "Persuading consumers that meat and meat products were nutritious, value-for-money foods [was] the ultimate aim of the plan" (*Butcher & Processor*, Dec 1987: 5). The implicit assumption in each case is that consumers make their choices by evaluating clear criteria such as cost and healthiness. That meat is highly valued is taken as self-evident, as shown by its regular and long-standing use as an *indicator* of welfare and economic development:

The better-paid workers, especially those in whose families every member is able to earn something, have good food as long as this state of things lasts; meat daily, and bacon and cheese for supper. Where wages are less, meat is used only two or three times a week, and the proportion of



bread and potatoes increases. Descending gradually, we find the animal food reduced to a small piece of bacon cut up with the potatoes; lower still, even this disappears, and there remains only bread, cheese, porridge, and potatoes, until on the lowest rung of the ladder, among the Irish, potatoes form the sole food (Engels, 1844: 372).

Nakornthab (1986) uses meat eating similarly as a primary measure of Thailand's urban development, alongside use of electricity, tax revenue, and car ownership, and Shields (1986) likewise takes rising meat consumption as a "clear illustration" of increasing prosperity in the Iraqi city of Mosul in the nineteenth century.

To accept without question that meat is preferred food — to assume that it is prestigious, or even desirable — as if these *attributes* were in some way *inherent* in the substance itself, is to oversimplify, or disregard, the range of ideas that meat supports. This is not to suggest that economists' calculations, such as of the "price-elasticity" and "cross-price effects"<sup>1</sup> of the different meats, are not valid analytical procedures (eg. Peters *et al*, 1983), but merely that these cannot be more than synchronic "snapshots" of idealised representations of aggregate social behaviour in a particular society. This sort of qualification of formal economics' applicability is by no means new. Percy Cohen notes that:

it is generally recognized that, although economic analysis can usually explain changes in certain values, such as wage-rates, it can explain neither the actual values themselves nor, therefore, why some values are much lower than others, since these have their origins in certain customary arrangements of the past (P. Cohen, 1967: 102-3).

Economists such as Simmel have also long recognised that value is never an intrinsic property of objects, but is an assessment of them by subjects (Simmel, 1978 [1907]). But economics is nonetheless still commonly represented as if it were an independently deterministic force in our affairs, governing our habits rather than reflecting them. A fairly typical piece of agricultural economics research, for example, analyses:

factors affecting the demand for nutritional and nonnutritional components of red meat, poultry and fish items by households in the United States. The components were: protein, food energy, iron, type of animal

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<sup>1</sup> Price elasticity: the relationship between changes in price to changes in demand; cross-price effects: the effect of the changes in price of one meat on demand for another.



product, bonelessness, processing, cutting (into steaks, chops, or parts), and an adjustment for quantity purchased. The first stage functions related prices of red meat, poultry, and fish items to the components of the items to obtain implicit prices of components. The second stage functions estimated the influence of income, socioeconomic factors, and implicit prices of components on the quantities of components purchased (Hager, 1985: abstract).

It concludes that "households do appear willing to pay for both nutrient and nonnutrient components of food items. The demand for these components was related to the socioeconomic characteristics of the households and to their incomes. Small variations in the implicit prices of such components had little or no effect on quantities of components contained in the purchased items, but further research is warranted". In other words, as far as could be established, it was found that affluent people tended to buy different sorts of meat than less affluent people — not, one might think, the most remarkable piece of research. The significant point, however, is that the only nonnutritional aspects of value considered are such things as the way the meat is cut and presented.

Our restricted view of economics is part of a modern mythology of rationality and objectivity, as if its study can be conducted in value-free isolation from social considerations. Incantations replete with economic jargon are ritually uttered by politician and pundit alike as both explanation and solution to almost any class of problem, and whoever dares defy its reputedly inalienable laws risks intellectual perdition. Such intractably static conceptions as the example above are, however, poorly equipped to interpret the rapid and basic changes in the traditional perception of meat indicated, for example, by the increasing difficulty experienced by a meat company manager in marketing his product:

Q. ...prices in the last few years, as a proportion of income, have actually been falling, so you could say that meat has in fact been becoming relatively cheaper, and yet consumption has been in fairly steady decline?

*Right... if you see yourself as an actual shopper, all you see is the price itself, irrespective of your disposable income... you think "I remember when..." Unfortunately, the market place has changed as we all know, and there's no way that I can capitulate prices to get thirty-five pence off a pound of diced steak... And that's the problem. It's nothing to do with the fact that meat in relation to disposable income looks a good bet. It doesn't in the consumer's eyes because all they see is the price rising. They don't research their disposable income, and say "Oh well, I can afford it". They simply have moved then to luxury goods, and so on, and meat then is understandably a relatively poor choice.*



This fails to explain why meat is no longer regarded as quite the luxury good that it once was. To do so it is necessary to cast doubt on the adequacy of conventional approaches to economics, since a more firmly grounded perception of material transactions is vital to understanding meat's fluctuating fortunes.

THE MODERN CAPITALIST ECONOMY, as Marx recognised, shares a commonality of spirit with barter: "an effort to exchange in an object-centred, relatively impersonal, asocial manner" (Appadurai, 1986: 10). But the market mechanism, ostensibly divorced from the social sphere, is itself a cultural artifact that reflects a very particular point of view. It posits a split between the human spirit and its material setting, between the world of belief and the world of action, between dreams and reality, and this is itself illusory. The development of this peculiar brand of economics alongside the processes of industrialisation, and the consequent confusion of its narrow frame of reference with that of the broader human economy of social activities and institutions, is charted by Karl Polanyi:

Accordingly, there was a market price for the use of labor power, called wages, and a market price for the use of land, called rent. Labor and land were provided with markets of their own, similar to those of the proper commodities produced with their help.

The true scope of such a step can be gauged if we remember that labor is only another name for man, and land for nature. The commodity fiction handed over the fate of man and nature to the play of an automaton that ran in its own grooves and was governed by its own laws (Polanyi, 1977: 10-11).

Polanyi argues that it is a grave error to equate "the human economy in general with its market form", a distinction repeatedly obliterated by the economic *Zeitgeist* (Polanyi, 1977: 6). To assume that the economic laws by which we operate today are in any sense eternal or absolute is positively misleading, which is not to say that it is rare. One important effect of the confusion of the market economy with its broadly based social counterpart, Polanyi suggests, is an excessive emphasis on material motivations for human activities to the virtual exclusion of all other incentives, thereby warping our understanding of ourselves and our society. It is as if we have internalised the caricature of the individual in industrial society described by Raymond Firth:



Even if he is not merely a number on a payroll, it is his function as an energy factor, a provider of capital, or of organizing capacity that is of prime importance. As such it is his specific industrial characteristics, not his total social characteristics that matter. He is deemed to be replaceable. It is the magnitude and quality of his contribution to the economic process, irrespective of his personal status or position in the society, that defines him (Firth, 1951: 137).

Non-monetary aspects of human interaction have been effectively marginalised so that ultimately only rational, money-based activities are regarded as real, and thence only the economic system as real society. "Formal" economics is instrumental in shaping our world view, with social and political premises, and social and political effects. It is part of the masculine ethos that has been in the ascendant in Western culture throughout recent history, stressing mechanism, reductionism, competition, hierarchy, and dominion. According to Bertrand Russell, the pivotal emphasis given to the competitive element ("survival of the fittest") in evolutionary theory by Darwin, and particularly by his followers and interpreters — which is still regularly invoked to justify exploitative practices in the financial world as well as in the meat supply system — largely mirrors the thrust of the same political ideology:

Darwinism was an application to the whole of animal and vegetable life of Malthus's theory of population, which was an integral part of the politics and economics of the Benthamites — a global free competition in which victory went to the animals that most resembled successful capitalists (Russell, 1946: 808).

Significantly it is commonly those in positions of power who stand to gain most personally from the perpetuation of the ideology, and who have also maintained the greatest influence over communications, who determine the agenda upon which debate is based. Those in authority have for many years propagated an influential set of beliefs that are consistent in their view of the proper relations between the strong and the weak, whether the subjects be human or animal, which tend to regard power as the lawful preserve of the powerful, and in which dominion over the natural world is an integral component:

In early modern England human rule over the lower creatures provided the mental analogue on which many political and social arrangements were based. Moreover, the two kinds of rule reinforced each other. The 'dominion' which God gave Adam over the animals, explained a Jacobean commentator, meant 'such a prevailing and possessing as a master hath over servants'. Men enjoyed dominion over the lower creatures, but not all men. As a familiar proverb had it, 'The wisest of men saw it to be a great evil that servants should ride on horses' (Thomas, 1983: 46).



Once again, analogous cases occur in a variety of circumstances. Amongst the Masai of Kenya, for example, Llewelyn-Davies records a conversation in which a prosperous elder boasts of his power in terms which clearly associates social control with control of animals:

I am extremely rich. Look at my cattle — they're mine and no one else's... the sheep — they're mine. You see this village — there are young people in it and there are old people in it — they're mine. Children, elders, women, old women, little boys — all mine. It's I who control them all. This is how I come to be an important person... I do not share with anyone... I am the owner who is in charge. I control people and I control cattle (Llewelyn-Davies, 1981: 330).

Indeed, as another example of speculative reconstruction of history, which may reflect current ideas and attitudes as much as it says anything of our prehistoric past, it is interesting to hear it suggested that management of herds could have been the catalyst which first instigated an interventionist and manipulative view of politics:

Inhabitants of societies which, like those of Polynesia, lived by vegetable-gardening and growing crops which require relatively little human intervention seem to have taken a relatively unambitious view of the ruler's function. They believed that nature should be left to take its course and that men could be trusted to fend for themselves without regulation from above. But the domestication of animals generated a more authoritarian attitude (Thomas, 1983: 46; quoting Haudricourt, 1962).

Thus, just as political and economic power are typically wielded by the same people, there has existed a general tendency for the ideology of domination of the natural world, which emphasises meat eating, to be associated with "right-wing" political beliefs, which propound such ideals as authority, tradition, laissez-faire economics, and libertarianism. Conversely, it is fitting that idealistic vegetarianism, which tends to advocate less exploitative relationships with animals, should traditionally have been linked to more egalitarian or socialist ideologies. George Orwell, for example, in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, suggests that:

The typical Socialist is not, as tremulous old ladies imagine, a ferocious-looking working man with greasy overalls and a raucous voice. He is either a youthful snob-Bolshevik who in five years' time will quite probably have made a wealthy marriage and been converted to Roman Catholicism; or, still more typically, a prim little man with a white-collar job, usually a secret teetotaller and often with vegetarian leanings, with a history of Nonconformity behind him (Orwell, 1984 [1937]: 152).



Suggesting that the provision and consumption of meat is associated with an exploitative ideology is not, of course, meant to imply that all suppliers or consumers of meat would necessarily adhere to such beliefs. With many, perhaps most, individuals, the inherent issues are rarely if ever explicitly raised. For most of us, perhaps, the prevailing ideology that constitutes the intellectual habitat in which our views are formulated, our justifications are promulgated, and our decisions are arrived at, is simply the reality that Bourdieu refers to as our *habitus* (1977). Market forces, for example, are almost religiously believed in by many influential people today — revered as the ultimate arbiter of what is right and proper, absolving the individual of the burden of personal responsibility — which provides a persuasive rationalisation for participants in the process of meat production, such as this farmer and his wife:

BILL *Yes, as a sheep producer, we're only supplying what the public wants from us. I don't think we're supplying a surplus as such, in the meat market...*

LESLIE *But then, I suppose a heroin supplier could say the same: "I'm only supplying the market that's there".*

BILL *Yes, I suppose that if we are supplying too much then I suppose that the prices come down to make it more tempting for the people to consume.*

By whatever process they have become conventional wisdom, we most often accept our culture's values as natural and incorporate them into our own beliefs, effectively perpetuating the status quo. Economics, in this way, has come to enjoy a uniquely mythological status in recent British thought. But we should not permit collective fixation upon a tool of analysis to lead it to become our focus. Enchantment by such a narrowly simplistic explanation for the complexities of human behaviour should not be permitted to dull sensitivity to alternative ways of understanding. The economics of the meat system can only be adequately evaluated by acknowledging the self-evident fact that society is socially constituted. In the case of this particular commodity, our prevailing ideology with regard to the natural world substantially informs our transactions — dictating whether we place high value, low value, or even negative value, on the flesh of other animals as an object of consumption.

REDUCING HUMAN ACTIVITIES, needs, ideals and aspirations to the manageable level of unitary transactions may be justifiable as a device for certain clearly delineated purposes, but the extent to which such abstract analysis is widely accepted as a "true" measure of individual interests should be, at the very least, contentious. All



the more surprising then that this sort of approach can still pass as largely unchallenged orthodoxy. For example, one might properly regard with considerable caution a system in which every penny spent on constructing weapons of destruction, on combating rising crime, on dealing with increasing incidence of mental and physical disease, and on mitigating the worst consequences of pollution, is automatically included as a positive benefit in calculating the principle index of social welfare — gross national product. When that system is intrinsically unable to calculate the diverse range of individual and communal considerations and values that contribute to every economic transaction it is arguably time for its assumed applicability to be severely curtailed. The approach, according to some, presents an “awesome catalogue of failure and misconception”:

With their money-based indicators and targets, oriented almost exclusively towards the formal economy, economists have consistently misread the situation and many of their prescriptions and remedies have actually caused it to deteriorate. Among other failings, these indicators are inclined to confuse costs and benefits, leave social and environmental factors out of account, and ignore the informal economy altogether as a source of work and wealth (Henderson, Lintott & Sparrow, 1986: 38).

This formal view of economics also substantially underpins the genre of academic work where functional explanations are sought for food habits. An American textbook on nutritional anthropology, for example, explicitly states that...

Rural nutrition is primarily determined by ecology and urban nutrition by economics (McElroy & Townsend, 1985: 174).

...as if urban dwellers were in real life the idealised rational decision makers upon whom economic models are based.

Marvin Harris similarly holds that “there are generally good and sufficient practical reasons for why people do what they do, and food is no exception”. He argues that considering anything but material explanations tends only to prevent “people from understanding the causes of their social life” (Harris, 1986: 14; 1975: vii). His analyses accordingly involve straightforward forces that “cause” us to behave as we do, such as a rational nutritional motive for cannibalism. In so far as Harris is a product of modern Western culture his views are perhaps not surprising, but the irony of his claim that “people are taught to value elaborate ‘spiritualized’ explanations of cultural phenomena more than down-to-earth material ones” (1975: vii) is that, on the contrary, it is normally only that which can be directly observed and measured that is today



afforded real credibility. His theories offer alluringly scientific explanations to a society that has become used to being told that anything else is practically an irrelevance. The interesting thing about Harris's position is his determined denial of a social component to social activities.

A fine example of this formalist approach is provided by David Riches who disputes Sahlins's conception of hunter-gatherers as the "original affluent society" (1972) on the grounds that "scarcity may well exist in the hunter-gatherer economy". Riches's reasoning rests on the observation that in many such societies "the consumption of meat is very highly regarded [yet] constitutes as little as 20% of food intake", from which he concludes that their meat intake is, for them, inadequate. Its securing, he holds, is inhibited by cultural factors such as gambling which restrict time-consuming hunting (Riches, 1982: 216). However, to dispute a people's wellbeing on the grounds that they prefer to allocate time to one greatly enjoyed leisure activity (gambling) than to another more arduous activity required to obtain extra quantities of a particular good already provided in fair amounts (hunting), is hardly supportable. It presupposes, for example, the local validity of a premise endemic in Western economic theory: namely that wants and needs, as expressed by demand, are non-finite within a context of finite supply, whilst it ignores the law of diminishing marginal utility which states that the more one has of any commodity the less one will be likely to exchange for more of it (Stigler, 1947: 67-76). This is nonetheless what Riches argues since, to his thinking, as meat is a highly regarded good it must be desired in almost unlimited quantities. That this is not how the particular people concerned think hardly enters into the matter — an attitude Riches justifies on the grounds that "to discover what people know one cannot by any means rely on their verbal statements [and] to discern what goals people are realising one cannot simply investigate the activity in which they are engaged" (1982: 6); the solution he holds, quoting Holy (1976: 30), is that "an anthropologist must be willing to postulate the knowledge guiding this behaviour, even if this knowledge was never verbalised by the actors themselves" — a defensible argument taken here to indefensible lengths. Moreover, Riches falls into the trap of seeing meat as inherently desirable, when its very scarcity in part endows it with high value. Even within the narrow remit of formal economics it is recognised that objects are not difficult to acquire because they are valuable, "but we call those objects valuable that resist our desire to possess them" (Simmel, 1978 [1907]: 67).



This example has a wider relevance than to the subsistence-economy peoples discussed by Riches, for the same attitude exemplified here prevails likewise in standard economic analyses in modern, Western societies. Since Mauss published his *Essai sur le don* [The Gift] in 1925, substantivist economists have repeatedly shown that attempts to consider exchange of goods in traditional societies outwith their social setting are badly misguided, and that exchange can only be understood as one aspect of the system of social interaction in general (eg. Dalton, 1961). Formal economic concepts indiscriminately applied to our own ways of life may be just as inappropriate as they are seriously misleading when imposed on other cultures. As Marshall Sahlins puts it:

What is finally distinctive of Western civilization is the mode of symbolic production, this very disguise in the form of a growing GNP of the process by which symbolic value is created (Sahlins, 1976: 220).

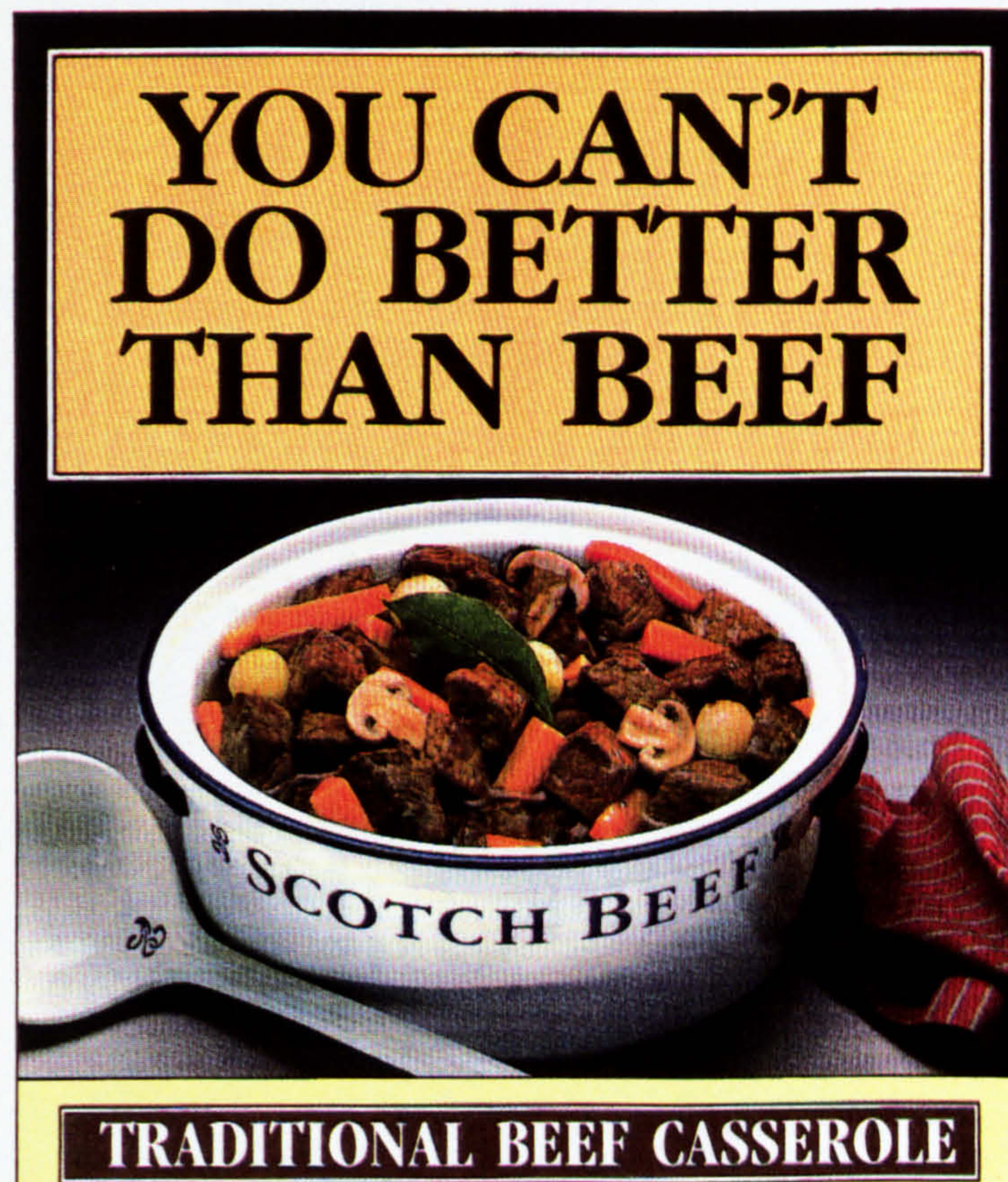
Even in our own nominally secular society, economic exchange is social exchange. The economic system upon which the modern world is founded embodies a multitude of value-assumptions which normally go unnoticed, still less challenged. Ultimately, however, it reflects our cultural values. The economics of a commodity such as meat should not, and cannot properly, be studied as a disembodied quantity. Only by considering transactions in their specific cultural setting can ascription of value be interpreted. An example is provided by the superintendant of a residential home for the elderly who encounters problems in persuading her catering staff to use certain meats, since their perceptions do not entirely equate with economic reality:

*And I am in an interesting position, because I will now and again try to say "let's try venison", and because it is sometimes economical to eat venison, or hare, or rabbit, you can talk the cooks into it. One cook is fifty and one cook is 25, and the 25 year old won't turn a hair and will happily put it on the menu. With the 50 year old I had to say that it was cheaper, and just hoping it was so. It may not be much cheaper, but it was certainly not the kind of king's meal that they thought it was.*

That meat is highly valued cannot be taken for granted. Meat's value reflects its appraisal by individuals within a culture, and it is the *reasons* for that appraisal which must be investigated, to which end the analysis of abstract statistics favoured by many economic theoreticians may be little more than a circular diversion.



20. Meat maintains a prestigious image in British tradition



A USEFUL APPROACH to understanding meat's value would be to aim to identify those attributes for which it is esteemed, relative to other commodities, since (in accordance with the economists' concept of opportunity cost) if we choose to invest time, money, or any other currency, in obtaining, preparing, offering, or eating meat, then we do so in preference to alternative ways of allocating those resources — for other foods, other activities, or other possibilities such as charity or saving:

*...like you find that even when people are cutting back on some foods, they're still spending on smoking or...*

Meat eating, like any consumption, is a manifest expression of personal ideas in a cultural context, and it is to these *ideas* we should look for the source of observed value. It is necessary to ask *why* the food is highly esteemed, and the answer can only be found in the ideas communicated by individuals in society:

Even if our own approach to things is conditioned necessarily by the view that things have no meanings apart from those that human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow them with, the anthropological problem is that this formal truth does not illuminate the



concrete, historical circulation of things. For that we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things. Thus, even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context (Appadurai, 1986: 5).

To individual consumers, who naturally tend to take their own beliefs for granted, it may well appear that the high cost of meat is the reason for their unwillingness to eat it. To the market researcher, who enquires about the motive for their abstention, it may likewise appear a reasonable enough explanation. But only by delving deeper into the general system of ideas associated with that food, and identifying the beliefs which interfere with their acceptance by particular individuals, can the reasons be established that lead some people to value meat less highly than others, and so be unwilling to pay that high price:

Q. So why don't you eat meat?

*Oh, I can't afford it. My boyfriend and I are both living on grants and we just can't manage it.*

Q. Is that really the only reason?

*Yes. Absolutely. We just don't have the money. It's far too expensive.*

Q. So you still enjoy eating it if you've been invited to dinner by friends or something then?

*Well, no, I still prefer not to really.*

Q. What, even if you're not paying?

*Well, yes. I don't really know why. I just prefer not to. I know it's silly, but we'll usually ask if we can have something else.*

Q. You must have some idea why, surely? Give me a clue?

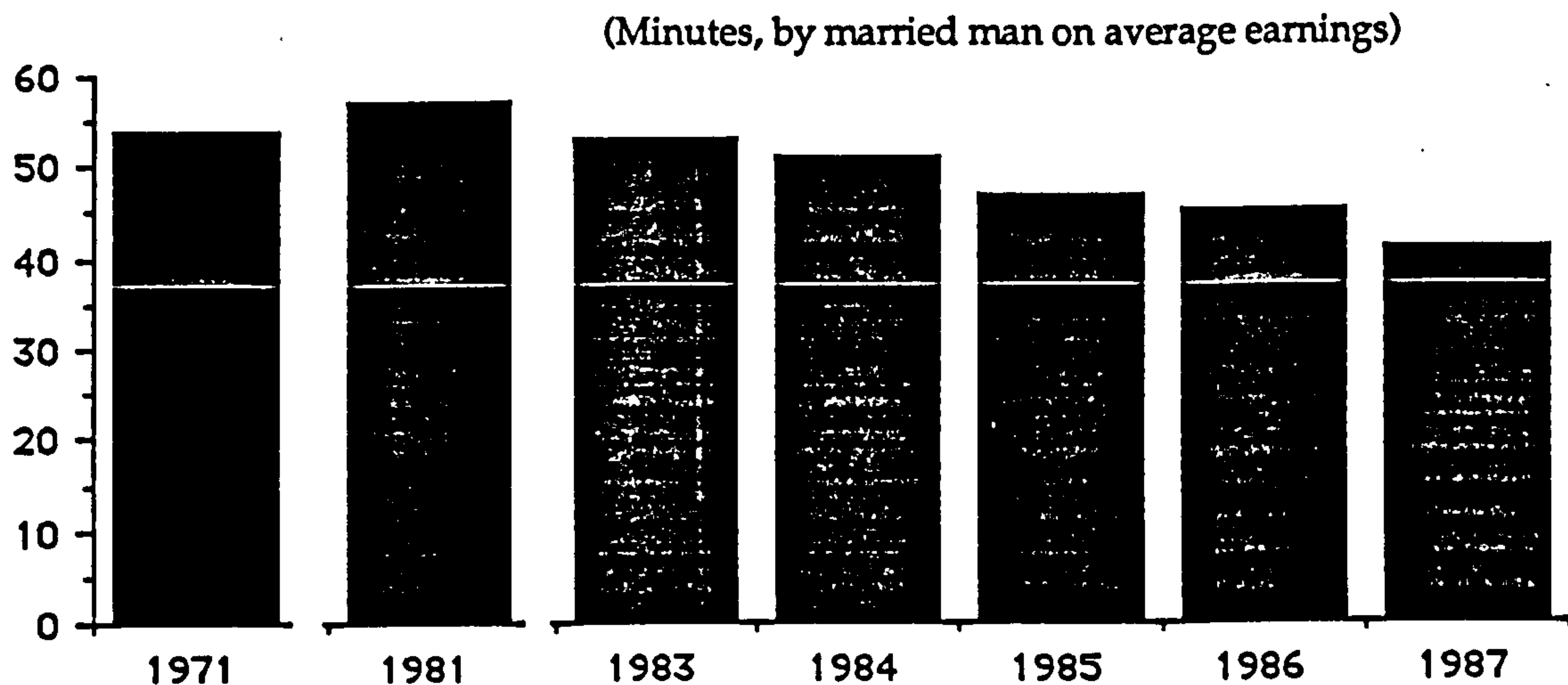
*I don't know. I just don't like the taste.*

Q. Do you mean you've grown out of liking it after not eating it for so long?

*No, I don't think it's that. I suppose... it's something to do with not liking the thought of... I don't know. Just not liking the idea of the animal being... killed... so that I can eat it. It's horrible.*

Price alone could not adequately explain the existence of vegetarianism. High prices might lead people to eat less meat, but not to avoid it altogether. In fact, however, measured as a proportion of average income, the price of meat in Britain has actually fallen considerably in recent years — a sign of declining value in real terms:



Fig 7: Length of working time necessary to pay for 1lb of rump steak, 1971-1987.

(Source: HMSO Social Trends 19, 1989).

Spending on red meat in particular, as a proportion of household income, is projected to fall from 2.5 to 2 pence in the pound next year, and thereafter to between 1.8 and 1.9p. The Meat and Livestock Commission correctly reason that "as lifestyle and priorities change, so too do eating habits" (*Meat Trades Journal*, 27 July 1989: 20).

Another sign that changing buying habits do not merely reflect changing prices is that many people report a willingness to pay considerably more than normal for humanely produced foodstuffs, despite acknowledging that there may be little observable or nutritional difference in the product purchased:

*It costs a bit more. I don't mind paying a bit more for free-range things. People say, "oh it's so much dearer", but I don't really mind. But not everyone can afford that... That's why I'm usually willing to pay more for free-range things: knowing that they've at least seen the daylight.*

Clearly then, explanations for changing meat consumption behaviour that have recourse to economic phenomena, such as price or value, may be misleading if they fail to pay due attention to the meaning-full basis of those concepts. Some individuals may be aware of, for example, the moral considerations which they allow to modify their rational economic choices. For others the ideological judgement involved may be so taken-for-granted that it is not recognised at all. Nonetheless, the *meaning* of a commodity plays an indissolubly key role in defining the pattern of economic



transactions within any society, including our own, just as an individual's set of beliefs constitute the essential context of their economic behaviour:

Q. Have you ever been completely vegetarian?

*No, never completely. It really started with political awareness — sort of Third World issues and all that — that got me thinking about eating meat, or less meat... and the combination of moving away from home and not really being able to afford to eat meat anyway: so the two things really coincided.*

ALTHOUGH THE SOURCE OF OBSERVED VALUE of goods exchanged should not be sought in qualities inherent in the items themselves, and meat cannot be assumed to be of intrinsically high value, the evidence from observing animal flesh as a “thing-in-motion” in society — from interpreting the concepts attaching to it — strongly suggests that it may justifiably be said to be a Natural Symbol of high value. This is due to its place in the categorisation by which we (and many other cultures) have traditionally ordered our world, and in view of the spirit in which we approach the world.

That meat is the flesh of what were once living animals destined for our physical consumption makes it an exceptionally well suited exemplification of our ability to control and vanquish the non-human world — a goal, as shown in Chapters 5 and 6, upon which we have traditionally, perhaps with good reason, placed great emphasis. This is not to say that meat will *inevitably* hold elevated social status, only that it is highly likely to be viewed positively so long as our ability to control the wild is highly valued. This explanation is complementary to such considerations as a nutritional motive for meat eating. Such influences are in no way in dispute; but that single level of explanation cannot entirely account for the pre-eminence of meat in our food system.

The natural environment resists our desire to possess and control it. To the many human cultures which have striven to establish their identity apart from and above the rest of nature the consumption of animal meat is an eminently suitable choice to represent power, achievement, prestige, civilisation: humanity. Meat is partly valued *because* it is expensive to produce in terms of effort and of environmental cost, not in spite of it, for much the same reason as led Lévi-Strauss to note that roasting is the most prestigious method of cooking meat in many societies, since it incurs the greatest wastage (1966). Marvin Harris elevates this component of meat's value, to the



exclusion of all others. in postulating that in agricultural societies "animal foods are especially good to eat nutritionally, but they are also especially hard to produce. Animal foods get their symbolic power from this combination of utility and scarcity" (Harris, 1986: 22). We may cite nutrition to justify our preference but, for reasons explained in the introduction, that alone does not seem to be sufficient to endow meat with the paramount position it enjoys. Its economic primacy is conditioned at an altogether different level of thought by what meat represents to our society: control of the natural world and everything in it.

Time and again we encounter cases of meat consumption as a generally recognised *motif* representing power and affluence, or of its absence representing deprivation. When the presenter of the BBC Radio 4 morning news programme, *Today*, wishes to commit the government minister for social security to a reasonable definition of poverty, he asks "Would you agree that someone is poor if they cannot afford to buy meat regularly?" (12 May 1989). When the local newspaper wishes to feature the hardship suffered by students struggling by on diminishing funding, it publishes a photograph of one sitting huddled in the December chill, with the caption "Lucy: a treat is drooling over steaks in the supermarket" (*Edinburgh Evening News*, 9 Dec 1988: 14); when Khrushchev wished to boost the status of the Soviet Union's communist system one of his principle goals is said to have been to overtake the United States in meat production (Vladimir Voinovich, in *The Guardian*, 28 Dec 1987: 13); and when Marvin Harris wishes to score a few political points for his homeland, whilst ostensibly explaining his pet theory of "meat hunger", he proselytises:

Picture a line of people dressed in shabby raincoats, umbrellas in one hand and an assortment of plastic bags and briefcases in the other. As they shuffle forward in the grey dawn, the ones up front grudgingly make room for women who are pregnant or carrying infants. Those behind grumble and make jokes about pillows stuffed under dresses and babies borrowed for the morning. One woman in a knit cap explains: "Nothing has gone up in price at this stand because there's nothing here anyway." The Polish people are beginning their daily hunt for meat (Harris, 1986: 19).

Consistent with this are the many and various associations made between the monetary system and the animal foods system. Thus meat is not only an expensive food financially; the culinary term "rich" is extensively applied to flavours deriving from animal products.

*I like occasionally a nice... juicy steak. I know that sounds a real... a real stereotype. But not very often.*



Q. Why not?

*Why not? Erm... it's very rich... and it's very expensive... yes, it's expensive, but it's very nice to go out and have... um... a rump steak.*

Meat, and possession of live animals, has historically signified wealth and strength. Control of animal muscle both begets and denotes economic "muscle". The term chattels, meaning moveable property, derives from the same old French word as cattle; as Jonathan Culler points out, linguistically the English word cattle at one time meant "property in general, then gradually came to be restricted to four-footed property only (a new category), before it finally attained its modern sense of domesticated bovines" (Culler, 1976: 22). Thus, too, the word pecuniary derives from the Latin *pecus*, again meaning cattle. And in Ancient Greece animals also stood for wealth: in the *Iliad*, Homer ridicules Elancus for exchanging his golden armour worth 100 oxen for Diomedes's bronze armour worth only 9 oxen (*Iliad*, vi, 234).

Meat has been a potent symbol of power over the wilderness, perhaps particularly historically whilst it has been difficult and costly to obtain and to maintain. The supply of animals, and thus of meat, has tended therefore to be controlled primarily by the wealthier, the more skilled, the more powerful, the central actors in the human drama... those who accredit themselves as the more civilised of people. Its provision and consumption has in turn been used to demonstrate the supposed affluence and sophistication of those who command its supply. The circle of meaning is complete.



# 12

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## Health

*I think there has been a big trend towards vegetarianism, but the reasons for it I'm not too sure. I think it has more to do with personal health than with considerations of the welfare of animals. But I also think that people find it a lot easier to say that they're vegetarian because they're concerned about their health than to say that they're vegetarian because they're concerned with the welfare of animals. They're probably worried about being accused of being too sentimental.*

THE AIM OF THIS CHAPTER is not to establish whether meat eating is physiologically healthy or unhealthy. It is rather to indicate why we *believe* meat to be one or the other, what we *think* are the causes and effects involved, and what, indeed, we *mean* by health, since it our beliefs that govern our actions — including meat buying.

Meat has long enjoyed a reputation as not just a useful, but a vital, source of nutrition. In many societies around the world, meat (or its modern, reductionist *alter ego*, protein) has traditionally been regarded as superior to any other food in its capacity to endow qualities such as strength and vigour, and this has been well supported by scientific research. Maimónides, for example, 12th century personal physician to Saladin, stressed the importance of diet as medical treatment in his *Treatise on Personal Hygiene and Dietetics*, with mutton, chicken and gamebirds, and also wholemeal bread, heading his list of good foods (Griggs, 1986: 3). Particularly



between the eighteenth and the early twentieth centuries such authoritative advice appeared in abundance — a period during which, as already noted, meat consumption was in any case rapidly rising:

Everyone's ideal was a heavy meat diet, since flesh, particularly beef, was, according to the doctors, "of all food... most agreeable to the nature of man and breedeth most abundant nourishment to the body"; and it was thought to make men virile and aggressive (Thomas, 1983: 26).

In 1833 William Beaumont, a US army surgeon, published descriptions of the stomach's operations, based on observations of a fur-trapper's unhealed wound, and concluded that "generally speaking, vegetable aliment requires more time, and probably greater powers of the gastric organs, than animal" (Griggs, 1986: 6). Two years later Thomas Graham agreed that animal food is "no doubt more allied to our nature, and more easily assimilated to our nourishment" whilst vegetables are "digested with more difficulty", explaining that in "the stomach, vegetable food always shows a tendency towards ascendancy, while animal food, on the contrary, tends towards putrefaction. Hence the former is apt to produce symptoms of uneasiness, while the latter in moderate quantity is almost never felt" (Graham: 1835: 154-168).

The most influential such work of the early modern period was that of the eminent German chemist, Baron Justus von Liebig. In *The Chemistry of Animals* (1842) and *Chemical Researches on Meat and its Preparation for Food* (1847), Liebig "popularised protein as the very staff of life, essential for the replacement of muscle tissue used up by physical exertion; and glorified meat as the most superior form of it: the protein contained in vegetables was decidedly inferior. In this respect, Liebig gave new scientific status to current notions that animal food was somehow more nutritious than mere vegetables, and his prestige soon endowed meat with near-magical properties" (Griggs, 1986: 15). In fact Liebig believed that the only substance capable of replacing the human muscle he erroneously thought to be lost with exercise was more actual muscle protein, or in other words meat — this despite knowing that most primates and other mammals subsist on little or no meat, and that societies around the world live healthily on vegetable diets.

There are several points worth making about Liebig and the origins of what has become known as the Protein Myth. The first is that as one of the foremost theoretical chemists of his day and, amongst other things, inventor and marketer of the



first chemical fertiliser, Liebig himself was committed to the scientific enterprise of human dominion over nature, and therefore can hardly be said to be impartial in his attitudes. That he should have regarded meat highly himself, and so come to scientifically extol meat as an essential human foodstuff, is consistent with the argument that meat is Man's mastery made manifest.

It is especially interesting that Liebig should propound muscle fibre as carrier of the putative physical power<sup>1</sup>, since the notion that food can somehow convey the physical or spiritual qualities of its source is widespread. As Simoons notes in the context of avoidances, "Primitive man is greatly concerned about the flesh food he eats: in consuming a fellow creature he exposes himself to all sorts of physical and spiritual influences" (Simoons, 1967: 117). The notion that "you are what you eat" is common to modern Buddhists as it was to 14th century Albigensians, who believed that "to eat animals was to interfere with metempsychosis, the vast circulation of souls between birds, mammals and men" (Le Roy Ladurie, 1980: 9). A similar notion was noted two centuries ago amongst American Indians who believed that a person who eats venison is swifter and wiser than one who eats "the flesh of the clumsy bear, or helpless dunghill fowls, the slow-footed tame cattle, or the heavy wallowing swine" (Adair, 1775: 113). Indeed, to this day, *Napoleon* brandy is reputed to contain infinitesimal proportions of the original spirit in which the hero's body was preserved for return to his native land; even in homeopathic doses, the drink is rumoured to fortify the drinker with something of his essence.

Simoons's ethnocentric attribution of such beliefs only to non-Western peoples should not obscure our own similar proclivity. Liebig's (and many contemporary) ideas entail a variation on this notion: that muscle begets muscle — the presentation of such beliefs in scientific language notwithstanding. It is doubly interesting that a scientist whose work on plant nutrition was revolutionary in refuting the older theory that life could only proceed from life, by showing combinations of pure minerals to support growth, should wrongly assume human muscle only to proceed from animal muscle. Despite his theoretical positivism, Liebig uniquely exempts humans from the laws that govern the rest of nature — a stance that staunchly adheres to the common conception of human superiority:

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<sup>1</sup> Truly carnivorous species do not confine themselves to the meat we most esteem, but by consuming innards and bone raw obtain the essential nutrients that would be missing from a diet of cooked flesh.



The dominant idea in 19th century nutrition was that muscle did not oxidise any component of food in its contraction, but that it oxidised its own substance. Thus protein requirements were elevated by work, since repair of muscle substance required protein. By this method protein provided the energy needed for work.

To some extent we may trace the genesis of this view to early studies on fasting animals or isolated muscle preparations falsely extrapolated to the normal, fed animal. We must also remember that this false extrapolation was made acceptable by the fact that protein was regarded as supremely important by 19th century biologists (Rivers, 1981: 8).

That Liebig should argue this case is important, but perhaps not as significant as that his theories met with academic acclaim, and won widespread popular influence. "As with the researches on plant growth, his theories on food had an enormous impact. Not only chemists and physiologists read and discussed his work, but amateur scientists, journalists, and even housewives became familiar with Liebig's ideas and his classification of foods. 'Carbonaceous' and 'nitrogenous' foods were as widely known in the 1850s as calories and vitamins are now" (McLaughlin, 1978: 65). His popularity has a straightforward explanation: "Such a theory was accepted almost uncritically, partly because of the great (and deserved) reputation of Liebig and his English translator and disciple, Lyon Playfair, but also because the middle-class Victorians were great meat-eaters by choice, and were quite pleased to be told that their diet was also scientifically approved" (McLaughlin, 1978: 67).

Science had conveniently established what its practitioners and audience already knew — that meat was essential food. Its power was directly linked with animal strength, through a metaphorical, as much as any nutritional, connection. Thus vegetarians are still caricatured as feeble and pallid, in contrast to the ruddy constitutions of their carnivorous counterparts. The primacy of animal protein accordingly became scientific orthodoxy until well into the 20th century, and is still influential today — so much so indeed that a recent writer on nutrition for sportspeople had to repudiate the enduringly pervasive influence of Victorian training diets which stressed meat almost exclusively as the source of animal strength:

Probably the most hallowed of the time honoured fads is the need for the pre-match steak or even the large emphasis on beef-steak in the diet of sportsmen (Paish, 1979: 35).



Science has played a key role in perpetuating the belief that only meat can offer proper nutrition, either by positively promoting meat, or by casting doubt on the safety of non-conventional diets. The latter genre, particularly deriving from some American authors of the 1960s to 1970s, is interesting for two reasons in particular. Firstly the typical view of individuals and groups concerned is significant: they are treated with barely disguised suspicion as if their subversive beliefs and behaviour threaten more than just conventional nutritional wisdom — which of course they do: in effect they challenge the society's entire cosmology. And secondly it is curious that such accounts should appear at a time when medical orthodoxy was changing quite rapidly, almost as if some commentators were unwilling to come to terms with the loss of their traditional criticism of non-meat diets and sought to defend their own habits by attempts at social stigmatisation instead. The discourse often misrepresents the most extreme practices or short-term dietary treatments as if they were normal behaviour, and is characteristically laced with terminology of "crazes" and "faddism" that ideologically marginalises the subjects:

In summary, it can be rather definitely concluded that humans are both animal and plant eaters, but of the two, animal foods are the foods that are essential in human nutrition. Theoretically, one can obtain sound health through a completely 100% vegetarian diet, but such is based upon our modern technology which has not been perfected, and is, therefore, very risky. The wisest diet is probably that which man has followed for millions of years which emphasises meat or animal protein (Abrams, 1980: 82).

The effects of faddist diets and cults may be summed up as follows: some fads are harmless in themselves, but many are deleterious and may be damaging to health if used for prolonged periods, eg. the Zen Macrobiotic diet... all are more expensive than a selection of nutritional foods from the grocery store; all strongly indicate a need for more knowledge of the psychological behaviour and emotional appeals that dominate the faddists, and thus an understanding of how to educate them in sound nutritional practices (Todhunter, 1973: 313).

Anyone who tries to help these people professionally has to understand each cult in the context of its own terms and must appreciate the influences that govern food-selection if he hopes to effect changes for the better... We have found that in making such attempts at education we have to be tolerant and even overlook the abuse that many of these people wish to impose upon themselves. In such cases the best we can do is keep them from abusing the children (Erhard, 1973: 12).

The continuing production of medical or psychological investigations into such topics as the "Psychological and cognitive characteristics of vegetarians" (Cooper *et al*, 1985) demonstrates the extent to which some scientists still regard vegetarian



preferences as an aberrant deviation from the norm. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of such work is not the answers arrived at, but the questions asked. This particular study, for example, employed:

8 different psychometric tests including the Hopkins Symptom Checklist (HSC), the illness behavior Questionnaire (IBQ), the Eysenck Personality Inventory, and the Hysteroid-Obsessoid Questionnaire. Results show that although subjects demonstrated elevated somatic concerns on the HSC and the IBQ, they did not differ from control populations cited in the test manuals on other dimensions of psychopathology. Health concerns were indicated as the primary reason for avoiding meat products, followed by the desire to avoid cruelty to animals, dislike of animal flesh, and fear of world food shortage. Subjects displayed a generally positive attitude toward modern medicine (abstract on PsycLIT Database).

The simple acceptance of exegetic explanations such as "dislike of animal flesh" belies the scientific sophistication of the authors' terminology, and the entire tenor of the report raises doubts about the nature of unstated assumptions which may initially have predisposed the researchers to suspect minority dietary practices, or elevated somatic concerns, to be symptomatic of psychopathology. Such research potentially says more about the culture which conducts it than about its subjects, not least for the implicit assumption that meat eating is the normal behaviour of mentally well-adjusted humans.

Some argue explicitly that meat consumption is physiologically embedded in our constitution. Marvin Harris, for example, still sells books on the premise that our "species-given physiology and digestive processes predispose us to learn to prefer animal foods. We and our primate cousins pay special attention to foods of animal origin because such foods have special characteristics which make them exceptionally nutritious", he says (Harris, 1986: 31). The facts, however, are not on his side. Most other primates in the wild pay considerably less attention to meat than we do, and it is significant that Harris can only allude to vague "characteristics", since science has largely deserted him.

Many individuals, vegetarian and meat eating, suggest in various ways that the consumption of animal flesh may engender physical changes in the body which amount to a sort of addiction that can be outgrown after a few days, weeks, or months of abstention. This explanation might, for example, help account for the phenomenon of meat-hunger whereby habitual meat eaters feel unsatisfied unless their meal contains



a proportion of animal flesh. The extent to which such cravings are physiological or psychological is, however, uncertain, although properly conducted experimentation could perhaps provide an answer.

Many people believe in the existence of other bodily characteristics associated with meat eating. This not only suggests the possibility of physiological effects of eating meat, but also casts an interesting light on the widespread association of meat with aggression. As the first informant here — a habitual vegetarian travelling in Africa — reports in a letter home, those of us who eat animal flesh may actually send subliminal signals describing our nature:

*Recently I have occasionally noticed a strange smell round the place and looked at people near me. Suddenly I realised it was me, and the reason is because I have been eating meat since coming to Africa. So you don't have to go very deep to see why animals and birds can know whether you are to be trusted or not!*

*Oh yes, it's definitely true. You can always tell a meat eater because their farts are so indescribably smelly! You can't help but notice it if you mix mostly with veggies, because... well, it's true that if someone eats masses and masses of beans, for example, then they might fart quite a bit... but the thing is that it doesn't actually smell all that objectionable. Whereas if you get a meat eater pumping away next to you, you'd better get out of the way! I mean, it's just totally different. They're, like... really bitterly rancid or something. You can smell the death erupting from inside them — literally.*

*Meat smells! Urgh. I never noticed before, but I notice now. I can smell it on people if they've been eating meat. I can tell. I mean, I have to be really close to them. But if Ian — my boyfriend — has been eating meat I can smell it. It's weird.*

*O. You mean on his breath...?*

*No, on his skin. It's horrible! It's really vile. I never used to be able to, but yeah, I can tell when he's been eating meat. I suppose it's probably quite horrible meat, it's probably kebabs or something; that wouldn't help! But I've noticed that: there'll be a sort of funny smell on his skin and I'll say "Have you been eating meat?", and he'll say yes. It's really yeuchy.*

But throughout much of British society the conception remains strong that high protein intake is beneficial or necessary to good health. This positive image is a particularly strong influence for those caring for others, such as the elderly or the young:

*I say four ounces of meat per head, but I am sure it is usually 6 or 7. Because [my staff], of my age group as well, think that if you give them a lot of meat then they'll be healthy. And I really have to pull myself together and say "let's*



*look at this". I'd rather have 2 vegetables and less meat, but I have to be very conscious of it in my own mind.*

*With an adult it's not so bad, but it's with growing children they say there can be a problem with that form of diet, because they've got to eat so much more to get the same protein levels — ie. to get that high protein level it's not going to be healthy for the child to eat that amount that's going to be required, if you see what I mean. Because with a high protein food, such as meat, the child is feeling satisfied and getting a good high protein ration. I believe that's right...*

Similar notions also pervade the thinking of many meat eaters and vegetarians alike, who fear that lack of meat's nutrients may be detrimental to their own health:

*I don't think I could become completely vegetarian. I think I'd find that difficult. Because then you have to work out your protein balance, and make sure you're getting enough soya beans and things.*

*Well, I know I get very tired sometimes and I think maybe I don't... maybe I am lacking in protein. I mean, my mother is absolutely sure I am. Yet other times you feel so good that you're absolutely sure that you're getting everything you need. But I do add Brewer's Yeast and things to things sometimes.*

*I certainly feel that I need to have meat every day. If I didn't... actually, I'm not sure how I would feel because it's so long since I haven't. But I'd be worried about getting enough protein, right enough. I mean, you need plenty of meat, especially if you're doing a proper job. If I didn't have a decent bit with my meal I think I'd not have the energy to go about and get on with things.*

*You've got to be joking. I'd die!*

Even amongst those who have avoided meat for many years, the conventional wisdom of meat's health-giving properties can remain a powerful influence. Chicken soup, for example, is a long-standing folk-remedy for all sorts of ailments, with a reputation for restoring strength:

*My friend Ian recently... he's vegetarian too, but he felt really ill, and he just got this craving for chicken soup, so he bought himself this tin of chicken soup, but I think he only ate about two spoons and felt even worse!*

Another vegetarian informant did, however, find that indulging her craving for meat alleviated her symptoms:

*I'd been suffering really bad period pains for several months, and then one day I just suddenly got this really strong feeling that what I needed was some meat. It was really strange. I mean, I'd not eaten any meat at all for about seven or eight years. But I just felt that I really had to have some. And it*



*just so happened that it was my boyfriend's birthday, so when he came round I grabbed him and dragged him off to this Italian restaurant, and ordered myself a steak. I think he was pretty surprised! But it did seem to help... and I actually quite enjoyed it! I don't know if I was in need of the iron or something and just felt it... or maybe it was just psychological, but it did seem to help.*

The assumption that protein, the most widely cited nutritional attribute of meat, is necessary to human health in large amounts is deeply ingrained in common knowledge. A sheep farmer, for example, uses the perceived need to justify the commitment of a high proportion of farming land to the production of animals and animal feeds, even when it is suggested that it may not be absolutely necessary for us to consume such amounts:

Q. But, some parts of the world always have lived on a basically vegetarian diet, and many people here do too quite healthily.

*But they, throughout their history, have never actually had an alternative anyway, have they? But in this particular country, we find it very difficult to grow high protein feed, apart from meats. What can we produce in this country that could be an alternative? And can we rely on imports of food. I think it's very important to basically farm your back garden. Especially being an island. We must monitor what we eat ourselves.*

In keeping with its traditional pre-eminence, the idea of nourishment is the most heavily promoted explicit value used by meat suppliers in promoting their product (although implicit images such as of tradition and family unity are widely used in publicity and advertising too — a typical advertisement in 1989, for example, promotes Bernard Matthews' *Golden Drummers* product as "Good to come home to"). A great deal of effort goes into keeping the public informed that meat is an indispensable part of a healthy diet:

A conference in Falkirk next Tuesday addressed by some of the country's top heart specialists will try to give a new image to red meat.

Called "Diet, Health and the Implications For Meat," it is hosted by the Meat and Livestock Commission, who obviously have a vested interest in proving their case, but who have recruited some formidable support from the medical profession.

Like bread, potatoes and pasta, all of which were regarded as "bad" foods until recent research proved the contrary, meat is now being re-assessed and found not guilty of the sins it was charged with.

The MLC, concerned over the drop in red meat consumption and its unhealthy image, have encouraged the farming industry to restock with leaner beasts and have urged the butchery trade to change the cuts they use, to produce a product much lower in saturated fats...

A national food survey in 1984 showed meat provided only 22 per cent of saturated fat in the average diet... much less than the 42 per cent in dairy



products, for example. ("Kinder Cuts", *Edinburgh Evening News*, 16 March 1988: 6)

21. The idea of body-building nourishment is heavily promoted



A supplier likewise believes meat's benefits to be under-appreciated by the public at large, and that a concerted attempt to educate people would reverse some of the damage done to its image by detractors:

Q. I wonder whether I might ask you about the other main reason that people talk about as a cause of change, and that's the whole area of health...

*I should be able to walk up the High Street of whichever local town and see the butcher telling me the same story. It's very simple — "meat is good for you", and then he can tell me a story about the riboflavin, and everything else... the vitamins that are in it and so forth... and seep it into my subconscious that I should continue to eat meat, because eating meat is good for you. So, there's lots of evidence for that. Medical science will tell you that. But the veggies and so forth will tell you differently from that. I've got nothing against cheeses, and I like eggs and so forth. I don't need to eat meat the whole time although I'm steeped in the business. But that's what's wrong with us actually — that we don't do enough to co-ordinate the resistance, or project a marketing strategy...*

RECENT SCIENTIFIC REPORTS have tended to concur that meat is not an absolute prerequisite to a healthy diet, finding, for example, that "it is difficult to obtain a mixed vegetable diet which will produce an appreciable loss of body protein without resorting to high levels of sugars, jams, and jellies, and other essentially protein-free foods" (Hegsted *et al*, 1955: 555). A major review of the scientific literature on vegetarian or near-vegetarian diets published in 1964 concluded that a "reasonably chosen plant diet, supplemented with a fair amount of dairy products, with or without



eggs, is apparently adequate for every nutritional requirement of all age groups" (Hardinge & Crooks, 1964: 537).

Just as research long provided academic support for belief in the need for meat in the human diet, so now, as more individuals were reducing their intake of animal products, reports appeared from the citadels of the scientific establishment endowing previously marginal beliefs with new respectability:

*I remember my mum going mad at me because she thought I didn't get enough protein, and I said "Well, I eat bread"... I think she got all excited about amino acids and how it was different ones and these didn't match, and how if you didn't eat meat you didn't get enough amino acids. Well! I'm not dead, and I don't see my muscles falling off my legs yet! And my heart hasn't quite stopped. So. [laughs] But there was an article in — I think it was the Lancet, or one of these medical things — about vegetarianism, and she never bothered me when she'd read that. She used to go on and on and on about how I was going to be malnourished, and then this article said as long as you're not vegan you're fine, and if you're vegan then worry about vitamin B12 and then apart from that you're fine, and then after that she never bothered me again. Thank you whoever wrote that article!*

Even within living memory, orthodox nutritional standards have been modified considerably. In "1948, when protein was in the ascendant, the National Research Council of the United States recommended a protein intake for small children that was almost precisely twice what was recommended by Britain's Department of Health and Social Security in 1969; and... the amount recommended by the FAO and the World Health Organisation... is now about half that DHSS figure. The practical significance of this is that it would have been hard to meet the NRC's 1948 recommendation without heavy reliance on animal products... To meet present requirements, you need use animal products only to supplement plant protein — or indeed, as vegans demonstrate, you do not require them as a protein source at all" (Tudge, 1985: 112). This gradual deconstruction of some of the longest-standing pillars of nutritional wisdom has in turn stimulated more people to reappraise their food selection:

*Well, in our day, well: "children"! My son is 35! In those days you had to stuff meat into them, and as much milk as you could make them eat, you know. And really give them a good diet to "keep out the cold" was the idea. And, now I think it's much more that a lighter diet is much more the... and now that I don't feel that I'm going to have their teeth fall out...*

It is not only in the late twentieth century that meat's dispensibility has been recognised, or that excessive consumption has been suggested to be detrimental to



health. In 1780, for example, the Scottish philosopher Adam Ferguson was reportedly restored to health by following a "Pythagorean course of diet" without meat (Thomas, 1983: 292, citing Small, 1864). Even a magazine dedicated to body-building at the turn of this century found space to warn in pseudo-scientific terms that red meat should be taken in moderation:

Don't eat dark meat too exclusively. Some people confine themselves to rare beef and the dark parts of fowl. The dark meat contains a larger amount than other kinds of the irritating stimulant extractive substances of the meat. These are especially unsuitable for nervous individuals and those of a gouty tendency (*Health & Strength*, Dec. 1901: 358).

Although concern about the healthiness of meat does have a long history, confidence in the nutritional adequacy of vegetable food and belief in the potential unhealthiness of meat eating has recently gained in circulation and acceptability. In contrast to Thomas Graham's view, cited above, that meat is the "more easily assimilated", people today are more likely to suggest that "heavier" meat is more difficult to digest in opposition to "light" vegetables:

*Yoga books and things all told me to eat less meat. And I had a flatmate at university who was vegetarian, so I didn't bother to eat meat when I was in the flat. And I discovered that I could eat vegetables and live!*

*And then, you know, we eat roast pork at about nine o' clock at night, and we both come home with the most appalling indigestion. So, you know, we're past that really.*

*I mean, it's quite hard to digest. I think my stomach would get upset. I remember I used to have trouble when I had the flatmate who was vegetarian and I used to go home in the holidays and things, and I used to have real problems with it.*

Red meat especially, in keeping with its archetypal reputation as the most meaty of meats, is widely believed today to be less easy on the stomach than, for example, poultry. This is recognised, amongst others, by a vendor of beef, as an advantage accruing to his rivals who specialise in white meat, and by a farmer:

*I think [white meat is] more easily digestible, plus easier cooked as well. And probably, without their realising, with all the things they were up to with added advantage, and the consumer perceiving more to it than there perhaps was, they switched on to feeling that white meat actually was preferable to health as well as everything else. Because it is more easily digestible: I*



*mean, it's a lot easier to eat chicken than it is actually to get your way through a steak.*

Q. But why do people at the moment seem to think that red meat is less healthy?

*I think because of the fatty layer, basically. It's the animal fats. It's more obvious in a red meat than in, say, a white meat. Certainly when we're talking about producing a finished animal now, they're looking for a more leaner type of carcase, because the butchers in the long term are only having to trim off the fat because the housewife doesn't want it any more. But they used to, because the housewife wanted a nice layer of fat to cook the meat in. And now they're going right back the other way.*

Although, to many, meat remains the necessary stuff of healthy nutrition, it has become an alternative modern orthodoxy that animal flesh is a guilty treat to be indulged in only in moderation, if at all. Even whilst promoting the butcher's viewpoint, for example, a local newspaper warns that:

Until ALL the medics, rather than the butchers, give meat a pass mark, it is probably wiser to keep it off the menu more than twice a week, and to insist on lean cuts when you do buy ("One Man's Meat...", *Edinburgh Evening News* 16 March 1988: 6).

## 22. A suggestion that eating hamburgers can be suicidal?



Source: *Guardian*, 9 March 1988

There has been no lack of research suggesting that high meat consumption can be unhealthy. Peter Cox, for example, takes a campaigning stance to describing the gamut of concerns ranging from chemical hormone residues in meat, whose use he suggests is probably more widespread on the black market than it ever was when legal



(1986: 24). His concern is reflected even in the *Meat Trades Journal* which recently headlined its front page with the news that "Farmers flout loophole in hormone ban" (27 July 1989), reporting routine discoveries of hormone treated cattle at abattoirs, with inspectors powerless to prevent the trade. Cox also documents the evidence of links between meat, fat, and protein consumption and various cancers; meat's alleged indictment as a significant factor in coronary heart disease; and also increasing antibiotic immunity, allergic reactions, diabetes, hypertension, gallstones — not to mention a general reduction in fitness (1986: 35-67; 82-102).

It is well-known that the vast majority of food poisoning is attributable to meat and animal products, concern for which has been increasingly reflected in disruption of sales; cooked meat sales in Cheshire and North Wales, for example, slumped by half after salmonella poisoning was linked to pork leg (*Meat Trades Journal*, 3 Aug. 1989: 3). But more serious threats continue to be identified. The trade press also recently reported that "British beef may be the source of a rare organism that can cause potentially fatal kidney failure", reporting the discovery by Sheffield public health researchers of an associated verotoxin producing *E. coli* (*Meat Trades Journal*, 27 July 1989: 15). And a study in Sweden by Noren (1987) suggested that the breast milk of women on lacto-vegetarian diets contained the lowest levels of DDT compounds, PCBs, and other environmental contaminants, compared to those on mixed diets. The highest levels were found in mothers with high consumption of fatty fish from the Baltic.

In the modern idiom, medical reports normally highlight a single factor inducing morbidity. The popular media, accordingly, have recently focussed upon a series of health issues in which animal products are incriminated. These include fears of contamination due to unhygienic slaughterhouse conditions, and actual outbreaks of food poisoning, such as salmonella, caused by the methods used in raising animals under intensive conditions. Concern is also expressed about the chemical residues such as growth hormones or antibiotics that can be found in meat, about other environmental contaminants which may be particularly concentrated by being passed up the food chain (including post-Chernobyl radioactivity), and about transmission of the "BSE" brain disease from cattle to humans:

Just when they can least afford it, Britain's farmers are under renewed suspicion.

They already face the charge of growing fat on subsidies while polluting our crops, water and countryside with nitrate fertilisers and pesticides.



And they allegedly profit by pumping livestock full of growth-boosting drugs while confining them cruelly.

Now cattle rearers are suspected of covering up a fatal bovine brain disease which may trigger a similar condition in man, because no one will pay them enough to be truthful...

It is, however, a lot easier to forgive the farming community than it is to understand the arrogance and complacency that are the benchmark of behaviour at the Ministry of Agriculture. Dairy farmers already face quotas and both milk and beef sales are in the doldrums — hit by health fears about saturated fat and red meat (James Erlichman, "BSE. A cow disease to beef about", *The Guardian*, 11 July 1988).

Some people take a tougher line, however, disputing the place of any meat, or indeed any animal products at all, in a healthy diet. A woman informant active in the animal rights movement, for example, believes her ethical standpoint to be fully vindicated by the medical evidence:

*I just don't understand why people won't wake up to the fact that almost all illness comes from eating animal products. It's just so obvious that vegans are so much more healthy, because they're not continually eating all those dreadful things that are so bad for you. The media will make a fuss about food poisoning, or cholesterol, or anything else as long as it's not looking at the whole picture, which is that we weren't designed to kill and eat other animals. It's like a sort of addictive disease that people have, which they go on doing even when they know it's killing them...*

Eating animals is reputed to harden our hearts not just physiologically. Another set of health concerns associated with meat eating involve notions of mental or spiritual effects — that it may, for example, make people cruel, insensitive, or aggressive. In some contexts this is put to use, such as in the traditionally high meat diet provided for soldiers. In others, however, it is seen in a less positive light:

*Yes, there's also that thing about not eating [meat] when you're in the throws of pent up or violent emotions, because it's sort of feeding your emotion, you know... if you're feeling great grief or great anger, then if you're eating, then you're actually making it worse in a way...*

An experiment compared 10 male undergraduates who ate vegetables for breakfast for 8 days with 10 who ate meat breakfasts for 8 days on scales of emotional upset (the Rosenzweig Picture Frustration Test). Two response measures indicated significantly more negative emotionality for the meat than for the vegetable eaters. Results are discussed in terms of previous research and possible blood chemistry mediation. (Weinstein & de-Man, 1982; abstract on PsycLIT Database).

*It's interesting that vegetarians tend to be a lot less aggressive. Whether that's because they don't eat meat, or whether they had that personality before... but that does seem to be the case.*



*Supposing I was having to take part in this... fighting ... and I was having to do that because my country's in a threatened state... so I'd be going out there with a gun and shooting these people... and at the same time not eating meat... I think that in the end I'd find that a bit difficult to reconcile.*

A range of health concerns therefore relate not only to concerns about industrial civilisation's physical consequences, but also to fears about the spiritual effects our culture's aggressive and exploitative ideology... ideas that will be more fully explored in the next chapter. It would be unrealistic to entirely separate the strands of thought, however, as they are inextricably interrelated.

ATTITUDES TO THE HEALTHINESS OF MEAT have changed. But why now? Progress is conventionally attributed to nutritional and epidemiological scientists' success in gaining a truer picture of the needs of the human body, and to improved dissemination of this scientific knowledge. Colin Tudge suggests there is cause for confidence in the consensus emerging about modern nutrition, because it addresses all the components of food; it acknowledges that the human diet is woven from many different threads; it is internally consistent; it is compounded of many kinds of evidence; and because "it looks like good biology" (Tudge, 1985: 10-11). Others dismiss such confident advice as mere fashion — after all, it is said, there have always been experts keen to explain the truth as they see it, and even today differences of opinion remain.

Whether or not science is indeed approaching ever nearer to understanding the needs of the human body, individuals and interest groups are still able to take from it what they will. Just as those who feel strongly that eating animals is wrong can prove to their satisfaction that the medical evidence shows it also to be unhealthy, and can try to attribute positive nutritional points in meat's favour to the industry's multi-million pound advertising budget, or "bribery" (Cox, 1986: 11), so the meat trade can find in scientific reports support for their conviction that it is nutritionally desirable, dismissing health fears as faddism, or worse:

*Whether it's listeria, or hysteria, it's all sorts of things going on... But that's what's wrong with us all: we're so susceptible to scaremongering, and fads, and so on. But there's money to be made from that.*



Nutritional advances may have assisted in changing attitudes, but cannot be sufficient explanation. Although science may have become more precise in its terminology, it has been known for many years that meat might have a price in terms of physical wellbeing. Most people have nevertheless preferred to indulge their tastes. What is new is the vigour with which significant numbers of people have begun to examine their diets. George Orwell, (1984 [1937]: 153) wrote that "the food-crank is by definition a person willing to cut himself off from human society in hopes of adding five years on to the life of his carcase; that is, a person out of touch with common humanity". Today, however, that crank will find any number of individuals and groups with whom to sociably share her or his concerns.

What has changed is not so much knowledge, as values. To suggest otherwise would rest on an erroneous view of the members of Western society as different in kind from those of every other culture known: as entirely rational, with objective, carefully analysed reasons for their actions, unlike members of "primitive" cultures. We must ask why red meat is seen by some as naughty-but-nice, whilst cheddar cheese, for example, with a far higher fat content, is still generally considered good sound nutrition. According to the trade, at least, there is no need to cut down on red meat for a healthy diet; delegates to a recent conference on "Diet, health and implications for meat", for example, were told that "while a high level of blood cholesterol was associated with increased link of heart disease, red meat was not to blame" (*British Meat*, Summer 1988: 17). It may in any case be misleading to talk of saturated fat, or cholesterol: although those are the terms that people may use, it is not the way they think — we are just not that logical...

The Vegetarian Society launched its Cordon Vert Cookery courses with a press release that featured a dish called Brazilian Bake. The dish derived 77% of its calories from fat; its content of saturated fat per 100g was three times that of lean beef (Harrington, 1985: 4).

How does meat threaten to contaminate, that cheese and nuts do not? (Brazil nuts as used in the above recipe are high in oil, 25% of which is saturated). Clues lie in our view of the substance itself. As Mary Douglas has shown (1966), pollution and contagion represent far more than the presence of mere toxins; they signify an ideological threat to *order*. The threat is not to our bodies, but to our minds: to our clear classification of how the world *should be*, and evidence of the threat that meat holds



for us can be identified, once again, in the ideas that we hold about it, and about health itself.

Perceptions of what it is to be healthy or unhealthy are the subject of a study by Crawford (1985). Through a series of minimally structured interviews, he aims to discover the social and material experiences for which the word "health" is believed relevant by contemporary Americans. His first conclusion is that:

A consistent and unmistakable theme runs through the interviews. Health is discussed in terms of self-control and a set of related concepts that include self-discipline, self-denial, and will power... To be healthy is almost equivalent to pursuing health through adopting the appropriate disciplined activities or controls (Crawford, 1985: 66).

As Crawford explains, the internal logic of the position is not unreasonable. With modern lifestyles that are widely health-denying — sedentary occupations, exposure to harmful substances, and pursual of high-risk activities — discipline is precisely the quality needed to "negotiate the minefields of health hazards" (1985: 72). And indeed, self-control is a theme repeatedly raised by informants questioned for the current study, not only by those avoiding meat, but also by its promoters:

Q. Can I ask you more particularly about the broader issue... of how you feel about the whole vegetarianism "thing", and why that's been happening recently...

*Well, let me just say how I've seen it happening. In May I'll be fifty nine years old, and most of my life actually revolves around a healthy attitude towards looking after myself. I've always ate well, and ate proper foods. I've thought about what I'm eating, so I've been health conscious all my life... I am still hyper-health conscious about going to a gymnasium, or going for a swim and so forth. Now the adjunctive relationship to that is that I will not indulge myself as far as food goes. I shall have the same disciplined attitudes towards the food I eat and the health consciousness of it, as I will towards looking after myself, and going for long walks, and so on and so forth... And I think that there is a real need for that as well, because as you hear of other people dying of heart attacks, and cholersterol and so forth, you've got to look after yourself.*

However, the view that health can be attained through self-discipline still presupposes the pursuit of health to be a rational therapeutic activity, whereas this conception of it, "as a goal to be achieved through instrumental behaviours aimed at maintaining or enhancing biological functioning, is integral to an encompassing symbolic order" (Crawford, 1985: 73). The reductionist approach to health maintenance is part and parcel of our scientific ethos. Crawford suggests that emphasis on control, which is



not a new theme but which does seem to have taken on new importance in recent years, is better explained as metaphorical, than as literal, health protection.

He presents the image of a situation where a society based on the "secular religion of capitalism — unlimited growth and continual improvement in living conditions — came up against the objective reality of 'limits' — an environment that could no longer support without irreversible damage the weight of unrestrained industrial production", such that the "social conditions perceived to affect health are too massive, too remote, too unchangeable, [so that] people will normally opt for a course of action within the sphere of personal control"<sup>1</sup> (1985: 98, 74). The pursuit of health is, in other words, a socially sanctioned outlet for a population who feel threatened by aspects of the world in which they live, and who seek to regain a feeling of security:

It is possible to say that health is thought about in terms of self-control. It is equally possible to say that self-control is "thought" through the medium of health (Crawford, 1985: 77).

This interpretation finds support from a commercial analyst, who similarly suggests that there has been a trend towards control over personal circumstances, due to a perception that the world is increasingly unsafe:

Faith Popcorn, chairperson and co-founder of BrainReserve, a New York-based media and marketing trend analysis consultancy, with fees ranging from \$75K-\$600K per client, monitors the whims of the buying public... At present, Popcorn is tracking a complex trend towards control, brought about by the need to avoid discomfort and to protect oneself from the harsh, unpredictable realities of the outside world. She's labelled a part of that trend 'cocooning' or building a safe shell around yourself with all the creature and electronic comforts money can buy (*Guardian*, 17 March 1988).

It seems that many people regard their diet as potentially one of the most effective means of self-control in a world seen as increasingly threatening. Signs of changing perceptions throughout the British population can arise in surprising contexts. For example, when the phenomenon of large numbers of seals dying in the North Sea came to the public's attention in 1988, it was noticeable that in spite of the efforts of many media experts to reduce the problem to an epidemic viral infection, there was a

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<sup>1</sup> Alternatively (or additionally), Crawford suggests, people take the opposite course and find avenues of *release*, abrogating personal responsibility for health, and finding means of escape from the implied pressures of life. Eating 'pleasurable' foods, regardless of supposed unhealthiness, is one such avenue.



widespread view amongst the public at large that the disease was better understood as a symptom of the wider problem of excessive pollution. The wife of a sheep farmer, for example, raised this issue whilst discussing fish-farming:

*But that has to be on the west coast of Scotland really, because the rest of the seas around Britain now are just far too polluted. That's through us and the Rhine mainly. It's like that thing with all the seals dying. Whatever the actual virus thing might have been, the fact is they're going to catch something, because the pollution is weakening their immune system. And if it's doing that to them, what is it doing to us?*

The importance of a trend towards self-control in this context is that one of the foods most frequently involved in this pattern of change is meat:

In my view, dietary advice and associated health issues will inevitably act as a depressant on the demand for red meat and meat products.

My reasons are:

- a. the sheer volume of media coverage (now and continuing) and the greater emphasis being given within the National Health Service to disease prevention via dietary improvements;
- b. the fat on meat is visible;
- c. the advice to eat less fat reinforces other objections to fat increasingly expressed by today's consumers;
- d. the advice to eat less fat reinforces other objections to meat eating in general or the eating of meat as currently produced, increasingly promulgated by interest groups and undoubtedly influencing some sectors of the public.

What is more, meat products will be particularly under pressure because:

- a. many products have a relatively high fat content;
- b. it is easy to create concern about what is used as a raw material for the product;
- c. there is a backlash against technology which manipulates the raw material to change its form and composition;
- d. additives are under increasing attack.

(Geoff Harrington, Director of Planning and Development, Meat & Livestock Commission, 1985: 23)

It is notable that a representative of the meat industry should refer to so many "associated issues". Health is not only disease prevention, but indeed encompasses other objections to (visible) fat; to meat as currently produced; to concern about the raw material; and to a backlash against technology. Health is more than the appraisal of material threats, and application of therapy, that modern medicine can imply — seeking, as Ivan Illich puts it, "to engineer the dreams of reason" (Illich, 1976: 47). Health is more straightforward than that. It is, in the end, "simply an everyday word that is used to designate the intensity with which individuals cope with their internal states and their environmental conditions" (Illich, 1976: 14). In other words, it



expresses *how well people feel*, which implies that considering a person's entire set of beliefs is necessary to assess their health, since how well we feel depends upon how happy we are about *everything* in our lives.

Illich argues that today's costly medical bureaucracies are in fact health-denying — "not in their instrumental but in their symbolic function: they all stress delivery of repair and maintenance of the human component of the megamachine" (1976: 69). They focus predominantly upon isolated causes of illness, and fail to recognise the many additional determinants of good or poor health. They deny the individual their responsibility and make it the preserve of the specialist. Through the imposition of a model of technological medicine, the individual is shaped into the model of modern industrial culture, as medicine in every culture performs a similar function (Zola, 1972). Health thus has a significant metaphorical component in addition to its literal operations, as Illich affirms:

Medicine is a moral enterprise and therefore inevitably gives content to good and evil. In every society, medicine, like law and religion, defines what is normal, proper, or desirable... Morality is as implicit in sickness as it is in crime or in sin (Illich, 1976: 53-54).

Decisions by members of our society to alter their eating habits may thus be more significant than is immediately obvious. The trend, by some at least, towards eating either less meat, or less of the meats perceived to be unhealthy — normally red meats and highly processed products — can be interpreted as part of a grassroots movement against institutionalised health care, as well as a search for control in a threatening environment. This must be seen against a background of rapid growth in the market for healthy food in general (including consumer resistance to chemical additives, and demand for wholefoods and organic produce), growing interest in exercise, and the popularity of so-called holistic approaches to medical practice in which individuals are treated as whole beings in a dynamic relationship with the environment upon which they depend. In this context, the evidence of a widespread reaction against the industrialisation of everyday life is strong.

A CONSISTENT THREAD IS EVIDENT in the many and various health concerns associated with meat and with other foods. They suggest rejection not only of the



unhealthy nutritional habits of modern society, but also of the implicit non-naturalness of many of the values of our civilisation. A good example is the notorious television "sausage programme" (*World in Action*, 7 October 1985) which showed the production of Mechanically Recovered Meat, after which sales of sausages and other processed meat products fell dramatically, never to fully recover. This was referred to by several informants, including by a retired solicitor, whose view of the entire food industry had been influenced by it:

*I think commercialisation is a very big part of it. You buy most of your food now through those very big stores. They produce stuff from... you don't know what it's made from. It's probably stuff that would otherwise have been thrown out. They turn it into something and give it a flavouring and advertise it, and people buy it.*

Alternative health practitioners of most disciplines include dietary advice as an integral part of therapy. For example, attention to food intake is seen as a necessary and effective response to complaints including arthritis and cancer, gastric ulcers, diabetes and heart disease — in other words to the afflictions of the modern, affluent, industrial world:

*If there's one single piece of advice I'd give to my patients — apart from maybe not to jump under buses — it's to eat less meat, and far more fresh fruit and vegetables. It's amazing to see the results when people do that: within a few days or weeks they find that the rheumatism or depression or migraines or whatever that's bothered them for years just stop happening!*

One text that takes a radical approach to the AIDS controversy, for example — arguing that the syndrome is essentially a symptom of general poor health due to pollution, devitalised foods, drug abuse (not least by the medical profession and farming industry) and loss of spiritual direction — suggests that a holistic path to regaining health should be a self-treatment programme including careful attention to food intake:

Generally it is suggested that fresh produce be consumed rather than any which has been canned, processed or frozen. If possible, organically produced vegetables and fruits should be eaten. Foods to which have been added any preservatives, colouring or flavouring should be avoided. This includes all smoked foods.

Meat which is produced under modern 'factory farm' conditions is thoroughly undesirable for a number of reasons, including the high saturated fat content and possible hormonal and antibiotic residues. The only flesh foods eaten should come from free living animals...

The consumption of animal fats increases levels of cholesterol, free fatty acids, triglycerides and bile acids. These inhibit various aspects of immune



function, including the proliferation of lymph tissues... and antibody response, as well as phagocytosis, which is the term that describes the eating up of microbes and foreign particles by the body's defences (Chaitow & Martin, 1988: 184).

I suggest that the particular causative connection advanced for each illness, accurate or inaccurate, is of less significance than the general observation that it is industrial civilisation, through the medium of chemicals or other residues, or through the application of unnatural processes, that is indicted. Fears of contamination are by no means restricted to meat, but partly because meat comes from animals high on the food chain and so may contain a higher concentration of toxins than an equivalent weight of vegetable matter, and partly because animal flesh as a food epitomises for us an exploitative relationship with nature, it is an ideal channel through which to express such concerns:

On new cattle breeding techniques, genetic engineering, and robotic milking, which could double the average milk yield in the next 25 years:

"Treated thus like a machine, the dairy cow, already at her limits, is producing five times as much milk as a cow in the 1950s. This "progress" results in a host of bovine disorders, mastitis, lameness and so on, which are treated with yet more drugs. Mr Bryson [author of previous article] does not mention this, nor the possible consequences to humans who drank the so-called "natural" product. It doesn't bother me that our grandchildren will not see cows in pastures. It does bother me that they won't see the animals indoors all their miserable lives, being milked five or six times a day.

One can only hope that the resulting poor health for humans, which will inevitably follow (as it has for consuming products from all other intensively-farmed animals and birds) will reverse all this scientific nonsense (Sue Berry, Letter to *The Guardian*, 30 Jan 1989).

Fatness in people was once thought (like meat) to indicate prosperity, but is today regarded, by the Western middle classes at least, increasingly as a sign of sloth, indiscipline, and decadence. As nature is thought to be a state where the fittest survive, so fat has come to signify the unfitness of unnatural culture. Even by a representative of the Meat and Livestock Commission, the very fatness of modern animals can be associated with successful control of their breeding:

But there is no doubt that the meat consumed by hunter-gatherers was in most cases very low in fat in marked contrast to the fat, farmed animals that have been a feature of Western agriculture over the last few hundred years. Consumption of high levels of saturated fat against a background of low-energy needs is a very new phenomenon in terms of man's history.

So eating meat is not unnatural — but eating fat meat could be so regarded (Harrington, 1985: 6).



The suggested link between meat eating and raised blood pressure — another hallmark of modern civilisation — is also related. A series of studies in the medical journals in recent years have concluded that those on vegetarian diets suffer less from rising blood pressure with age than the general population, or that adoption of such a diet could result in a fall in systolic blood pressure (Sacks *et al*, 1975; Armstrong *et al*, 1977; Rouse *et al*, 1983, 1983b; Margetts *et al*, 1986). It is significant that each of these studies specifically deals with various vegetarian diets rather than, say, high-fibre or low saturated fat diets. The clear implication is that it is *meat* that causes high blood pressure. This direct association of ill-health with meat is even made by members of the trade:

*And I think that we've suffered here from that as well: that you don't eat steaks any longer because that doesn't quite add up to the way we should go. I'm thinking of anabolic steroids, and hormones, this sort of idea — the whole sort of thing ties in: "let's be more natural". And even meat isn't quite as natural as it used to be, you see. So we want things that are more natural, so we eat cheeses, and more vegetables and so on and so forth.*

The authors of a bestselling book which advocates a diet consisting almost exclusively of raw vegetable foods as the way to full health deny that meat, as a high protein food, has any place at all:

So insidious and destructive are the effects of a high protein diet, and so extensive is the research which proves as much, that it is difficult to understand why the "lots of protein is good for you" myth still survives. Excess protein is so damningly implicated in premature aging that it is hard to understand how anyone who is serious about caring for themselves in the long term can continue to eat large quantities of high protein foods... Lots of protein certainly brings about early and rapid growth, but it also brings about early and rapid ageing and disease (Kenton & Kenton, 1984: 94).

Their argument is interesting on more than one level. In light of the argument outlined earlier that cooking, and particularly the cooking of meat, is a universal human trait, it is significant that the consumption of raw foods, without meat, should be advocated as the path to achieving natural health. As in so many other contexts, meat is consistently associated with cultural opposition to nature, and in recent years increasing numbers of people have recommended its avoidance in accordance with a desire to regain what are perceived to be natural virtues. That vegetable foods should be championed in their raw state is an appropriate development of this conceptual dichotomy. This points towards a deep-rooted change not only in attitudes to meat, but



in society's view of the world in general, and in particular of humanity's relationship with that environment.

This entire discussion implies the existence of a natural human diet, to contrast with the highly processed products of the modern food industry. The revived potency of this image is shown by the enthusiasm with which food manufacturers have sought to emblazon their wares with claims to natural goodness, so that by June 1989 the British government was moved to publish a code of practice for the use of terms such as natural. Even without such overt sloganising, however, evocation of Golden Age imagery is now endemic to the marketing of many foodstuffs:

When the history of the 1980s is written, will our great-grandchildren laugh about our attitude to packaged food, the rows of pies and breads on our supermarket shelves carrying pretty pictures of carthorses pulling ploughs, farmers in straw hats or homely ladies rolling out biscuits in country kitchens?

Surely, our descendants will ask, they realised that these foods were produced with combine harvesters not carthorses? And that they were processed in factories by machines? Surely they knew that straw hats and cockerels on fences were things of the past? We do, but we are also hooked on the idea of going back to some more 'natural' way of eating: what we are not so keen on is the hard graft it involves and we are therefore prepared to indulge in this extraordinary piece of double-think.....

Looking at our past to decide on our diet seems, in fact, to be a collective obsession... (Linda Gamlin, *The Guardian Food & Drink*, c. 1988).

As well as the use of 'natural' imagery as a technique for selling modern processed foodstuffs, a rebellion against industry is shown by the many people who aim, in the search for better health, to follow what is seen as a more traditional human diet. There are, however, many ideas of how this should be constituted:

...different groups of people go back to different stages in our past, and return with contradictory answers. Slightly further back from the country kitchen school, for example, are the proponents of macrobiotics: they abhor the modern increase in meat and dairy product consumption, along with the taste for tropical crops acquired from the explorers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We were all healthier, claims the macrobiotic lobby, when we ate mainly vegetable foods, and crops from temperate climes.....

Another 10,000 years back in time takes the nostalgia-dieter to the bleak landscape of Ice-Age Europe where hunting was the main source of nourishment, supplemented by a few berries and tender leaves in summer. From this comes the Stone-Age diet, advocated by Dr Richard Mackarness, a British doctor now retired and living in Australia. It consists mostly of meat, with the fat being eaten, plus some vegetables and fruit. In 1976, he wrote: 'For the past eighteen years I have been living as far as possible on a



Stone-Age type diet, rich in animal fat and protein and practically free of sugar, cereals and processed carbohydrates: a diet that some of my medical friends assure me should have given me a coronary thrombosis years ago... on the contrary, at the age of 59, I am in better health than ever'. He is still alive and well... (Linda Gamlin, *The Guardian Food & Drink*, c. 1988).

It is significant that, although it claims to trace its origins to the original human diet, the Mackarness diet has generally failed to find a large audience for its recommendation of a high-meat intake. Alternative work which similarly claims to be based on what we ate in the Stone Age has, however, received substantial publicity for its argument that our diet should contain fewer animal products:

Today's rising tide of coronary disease, diabetes, high blood pressure and some forms of cancer are no coincidence or ill fate of fortune...

It's interesting to note that these diseases seem to be virtually unknown among people living on what is described as 'paleolithic nutrition' — a diet based on that of man more than 10,000 years ago...

The work of authors S. Boyd Eaton MD and Melvin Konner PhD at the School of Medicine and the Department of Anthropology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, has thrown new light on the importance of man's diet when looking at his health...

From their observations, the authors say it is clear that dietary habits adopted over the last 100 years are greatly responsible for the increase in certain types of disease...

If we wish to consume animal protein, game is preferable to domesticated animals.

By restructuring parts of our diet towards the paleolithic pattern, it may be that we would shed many of the diseases of civilisation.

Inevitably, the question of the desirability of a vegetarian diet is also raised. As an omnivore man can, if he chooses, obtain all necessary nutrients from plant foods. Medical evidence points to lower cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure and other degenerative disease patterns among vegetarians.

It would seem that the food reform vegetarian is, despite his lack of animal protein, closer to the paleolithic ideal than the consumer of modern meat and civilised food.

Something worth thinking about ("Affluent Malnutrition: A Disease of our Time", *Here's Health*, July 1985: 81).

Because it is so inextricably associated with the dominance of human science and technology, developed over many thousands of years of hunting, farming, and industry, modern meat is likely to be proscribed by those desiring a return to our 'original' dietary patterns. The threat to our health is regarded as stemming from excessive manipulation of the materials we consume as food, and meat's traditional image accordingly indicts it.



In Chapter 4 it was shown that food is a ubiquitous metaphor through which we demarcate our cultural identity, and by which we characterise feared or despised outsiders. The unique aspect of our situation today is that it is apparently our very own attitudes that are distrusted and seen as suspect, our very own technological successes that are now perceived as a threat. Today it seems that we ourselves are the enemy.



# 13

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## Ethics & Religion

*I knew I shouldn't eat it for my health but I didn't listen to that, but then thought what they did to the animals... Yes.*

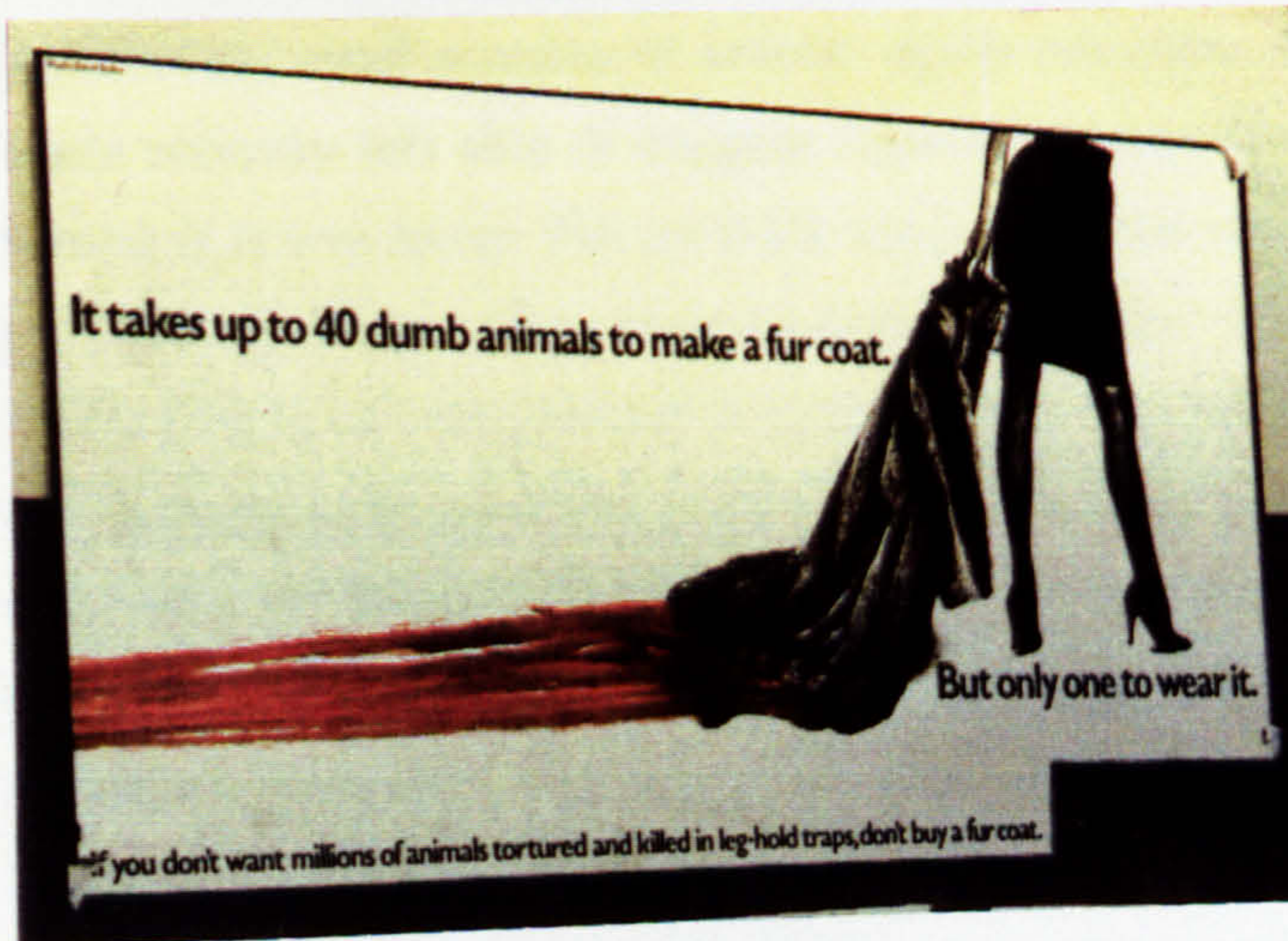
*It sometimes feels like it's a bloody sin to be seen eating meat at all in Edinburgh nowadays.*

ANIMAL RIGHTS has become something of a *cause célèbre* in recent years, partly due to the publicity given to the activities of the more zealous protagonists. Attacks on the homes of suspected vivisectionists, the fire-bombing and window-breaking of stores selling animal furs, attempts to contaminate hamburger supplies, and a range of other illegal actions, indicate the intensity with which some individuals believe that society is engaged in atrocities against non-human animals. "Sabbing", as members of the hunt sabotage movement refer to their actions, seems today to attract almost as many followers as the hunts against which they set themselves. Even the consumption of any meat at all can arouse strong feelings amongst many people, including recent converts:

*At first I was really fanatical. I used to go around everyone when they were eating and saying "You shouldn't eat meat; it's wrong", and at my parents at home I would take away all the meat out of the fridge and throw it over the wall in the yard. They got a bit fed up because it was proving quite expensive. But I've calmed down now.*



23. The fur trade has been a focus for protest against animal "abuse"





It would be inappropriate to characterise such ideas as being confined solely to a relatively small number of animal rights activists. Even a government minister for trade recently felt able to suggest legislation requiring the labelling of fur garments stating if it was likely that animals used had been caught in a type of leg trap seen as particularly cruel. The proposal had arisen, said Mr Clark, "from a steady flow of letters that have been coming in since I arrived at the office two years ago, asking me to ban imports of trapped fur. And it was a matter of working out, within my brief, what we could do about this level of moral indignation. This is a question of public enlightenment, not a statutory thing. It is saying that the public is able to make its own decisions, provided that it knows what is at stake" (*Guardian*, 7 April 1988). The legislation was ultimately dropped, allegedly under Canadian threats to cancel an order for a British nuclear installation, but the appearance of such proposals at all is nonetheless of some significance. It marks the increasingly broad base throughout society which concern for the treatment of animals has won — a concern that is deliberately promoted by some:

*When we first set ourselves up we registered as a company, and when you register as a company you have to list your aims and objectives, and one of the aims we put down was promoting vegetarianism and veganism, and I think we do that to a certain extent: increase interest in vegetarianism and that sort of thing. And six years ago there weren't all that many vegetarian cafés in Edinburgh, but now there's quite a few. So I wonder if maybe we've had some effect. Even non-vegetarian places now tend to serve a vegetarian alternative.*

Arguments which only a few years ago would have been regarded as unreasonably extreme have today won a measure of common acceptance, and evidence of more humane treatment of non-humans exists throughout modern British society. One of the most celebrated and commercially successful businesses of the 1980s has been the *Body Shop*, a chain of shops specialising in cosmetics prepared without animal products or animal testing. Noteworthily, it is headed by a woman. The pressure of publicity has persuaded longer established firms to follow suit.

Within farming circles the "argument in favour of [intensive] systems is that the stock have to be content to be healthy and healthy to be productive; thus the farmer has a strong vested interest in ensuring they are content", but here too there is a growing recognition that "many people now consider the price of progress is too high



and that the animals' needs have to be examined more carefully" (Farm Notebook, *The Scotsman*, 6 June 1988):

Dr Doolittle may have gone a little bit far in actually talking to the animals, but an increasing amount of research seems to indicate that a greater understanding of their needs would not come amiss... [But] breakthroughs in this field have been relatively few and far between. We are still stuck with battery cages for poultry and stalls for sows, for example...

Aside from the broad needs of providing food and shelter for intensive and semi-intensive livestock, farmers are broadly concerned for the welfare of the stock — some more than others of course — but perceived notions of animal behaviour may be due for an upset as research work continues and what was considered to be reasonable regard for welfare may turn out to be nothing of the kind (Farm Notebook, *The Scotsman*, 6 August 1988).

This apparent conversion towards the principle of a measure of care for the feelings of animals for their own sake, rather than merely for the impact on production efficiency, seems to indicate some change from the attitude of a 1929 meat trade textbook whose sole concession to animal welfare was to recommend that, at the abattoir, "slaughter immediately upon arrival is universally condemned" because exhausted animals bleed imperfectly, and that blows of all kinds should be avoided as they can cause "unsightly appearance in the meat" (Hammet & Nevell, 1929: 134). Several informants viewed the idea of any such progress with cynicism, however, suggesting, for example, that "*they're only in it for another fast buck*". Their scepticism could only be reinforced by the tone of the contemporary trade press. A fairly typical item in the *Meat Trades Journal* (10 Aug 1989), for example, bears the headline: "Good welfare saves money". It goes on to report that "Abattoirs and farmers are losing £5m a year through damage to animals in transit to slaughterhouses, according to animal welfare experts, the Humane Slaughter Association... HSA development officer, Mirian Parker, said fighting pigs and bad handling of sheep and cattle resulted in bruising and marks which knocked £5 million a year off the value of meat. 'Besides this stress related conditions affect the quality of the meat making it a lower standard and so getting a lower price,' she said.

There is widespread public sensitivity to the attitude that prevails within the food and farming community which still tends to regard care for animals as little more than a costly commercial necessity. A considerable, but still largely unsatisfied, market therefore exists for free-range products and organic meat deriving from animals that are perceived to have been more humanely reared. Many people are willing to



pay substantially more for such meat, whilst others simply avoid industrially produced meat altogether:

*I would call myself a conditional vegetarian, by which I mean I don't mind eating meat sometimes as long as I know that the animal has been well looked after, because I think that's fairly natural.*

Over recent history, mainstream opinion has developed from the assumption that animals have no rights whatsoever, their interests being entirely subject to those of humans, to growing agreement that they deserve some consideration, to a belief proposed by some that they have rights which are inalienable. Legislation governing the scope and nature of experimentation on live animals has been incrementally introduced, although its constraints are still far from sufficiently stringent to satisfy the more vigorous critics. The liberal pole of opinion, in the new animal rights movement, is committed to goals including abolition of the use of animals in science, dissolution of commercial animal agriculture, and elimination of commercial and sport hunting and trapping (Regan, 1985: 13). In other words it is the *extent* of animals' rights that is now the matter in question, rather than their existence.

THE BIBLICAL PHRASE "do unto others" presents a basic ethical dilemma: namely how far "others" extends beyond the self. Different individuals and different societies have drawn the limits of consideration at widely various thresholds. Their extension to animals is by no means new. Leonardo da Vinci was teased by his friends for being so concerned about the sufferings of animals that he became vegetarian (McCurdy, 1932: 78), and Plutarch warned: "Let us eat flesh; but only for hunger not for wantonness. Let us kill an animal; but let us do it with sorrow and pity and not abusing it or tormenting it, as many today are wont to do" (quoted in Pullar, 1970: 226). Take, on the other hand, the following account of the development of the Roman "games" from their origins as the combat of gladiators:

The simple combat became at last insipid, and every variety of atrocity was devised to stimulate the flagging interest. At one time a bear and a bull, chained together, rolled in fierce combat across the sand; at another, criminals dressed in the skins of wild beasts were thrown to bulls, which were maddened by red-hot irons, or by darts tipped with burning pitch. Four hundred bears were killed on a single day under Caligula... Under Nero, four hundred tigers fought with bulls and elephants... In a single day, at the dedication of the Colosseum by Titus, five thousand animals



perished. Under Trajan, the games continued for one hundred and twenty-three successive days. Lions, tigers, elephants, rhinoceroses, hippopotami, giraffes, bulls, stags, even crocodiles and serpents were employed to give novelty to the spectacle. Nor was any form of human suffering wanting... Ten thousand men fought during the games of Trajan. Nero illumined his gardens during the night by Christians burning in their pitchy shirts. Under Domitian, an army of feeble dwarfs was compelled to fight... So intense was the craving for blood, that a prince was less unpopular if he neglected the distribution of corn than if he neglected the games (Lecky, 1869: I, 280-282).

This does not, however, prove that the Romans were without morality. As Singer notes, they "showed a high regard for justice, public duty, and even kindness to others. What the games show, with hideous clarity, is that there was a sharp limit to these moral feelings. If a being came within this limit, activities comparable to what occurred at the games would have been considered an intolerable outrage; when a being was outside the sphere of moral concern, however, the infliction of suffering was merely entertaining. Some human beings — criminals and military captives especially — and all animals fell outside this sphere" (Singer, 1976: 208). Thus, another commentator adds, at the birth of Christianity, "we find the [humane] movement at an exceedingly low ebb. The Jewish people who had nursed it since the days of Moses were now a conquered and oppressed people, struggling to defend *themselves* rather than dumb animals from the cruelty of the Romans" (Niven, 1967: 25). The Romans, then, differed from ourselves both in the extremity of violence regarded as entertaining and in their justification of its object.

Keith Thomas suggests that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were particularly significant in the development of relations between Man and the Natural World (Thomas, 1983). Although Western societies had by then long sought to exert control over their environments, it was during that period that there came to prominence an ethic of human dominance whose influence is still felt today. Descartes is widely credited with popularising the notion that animals are automata incapable of suffering. It is, however, debatable whether he should be seen as originating the idea, or whether he rather distilled the spirit of his time when industry and technology were coming rapidly to the fore. Certainly, the early modern period saw a new conviction in the elevation philosophers, scientists, and theologians accorded to the human species. In catechistical doctrine, according to Lancelot Andrewes, animals had no rights: they "can have no right of society with us, because they want reason" (1650: 217); Bishop Ezekial Hopkins declared that "We may put them to any kind of



death that the necessity either of our food or physic will require" (1692: ii,3); to butcher animals for meat, according to Thomas Robinson, might seem cruel but "when closely enquired into" it proved "a kindness rather than cruelty", since their despatch was quick and they were spared the suffering of old age (1709: 77); Wollaston also opined that the sufferings of brutes are not like the sufferings of men, as they have no conception of the future and lose nothing by being deprived of life (1722: 34-5); and the nonconformist Philip Doddridge believed that because animals are "capable of but small degrees of happiness in comparison with man [it is] fit that their interests should give way to that of the human species whenever in any considerable article they come in competition with each other", and pointed to the fact that the instinct that brings fish in shoals to the sea-shore "seems an intimation that they are intended for human use" (1763: 130, 133).

As the Historian W.E.H. Lecky remarks, there were two kinds of cruelty: the cruelty which comes from carelessness or indifference; and the cruelty which comes from vindictiveness. In the case of animals what was normally displayed in the early modern period was the cruelty of indifference. For most persons, the beasts were outside the terms of moral reference. Contemporaries resembled those 'primitive' peoples of whom a modern anthropologist writes that they neither seek to inflict pain on animals nor to avoid doing so: 'pain in human beings outside the social circle or in animals tend to be a matter of minimal interest.' It was a world in which much of what would later be regarded as 'cruelty' had not yet been defined as such (Thomas, 1983: 148; quoting Lecky, 1913: 134; Firth, 1951: 199-200).

Even at this time not everyone was of one accord, and with the enlightenment in particular more voices came to be raised in animals' defence. David Hume talked of "gentle usage" to animals; Rousseau's idea of the "noble savage" brought a new appreciation of nature, if a somewhat romantic one; the Pope argued that we were also responsible to God for the "mismanagement" of animals; and Voltaire compared Christian practices unfavourably with Hindu (Singer, 1976: 220-223):

There are barbarians who seize this dog, who so greatly surpasses man in fidelity and friendship, and nail him down to a table and dissect him alive, to show you the mesaraic veins! You discover in him *all the same organs of feeling as in yourself*. Answer me, mechanist, has Nature arranged all the springs of feeling in this animal *to the end that he might not feel?* (Voltaire, *Dictionnaire Philosophique*: s.v. *Betes*)

Another rebuke to the Cartesian doctrine came from Nicholas Fontaine, after his experience of dissection in the late seventeenth century. He recalls: "They



administered beatings to dogs with perfect indifference, and made fun of those who pitied the creatures as if they felt pain. They said the animals were clocks; that the cries they emitted when struck were only the noise of a little spring that had been touched, but that the whole body was without feeling. They nailed poor animals up on boards by their four paws to vivisect them and see the circulation of the blood which was a great subject of conversation" (Fontaine, 1738: 2, 52-3). But perhaps the most famous contribution of the period to the "humane movement" is that of Jeremy Bentham:

The day may come when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may one day come to be recognized that the number of legs, the villocity of the skin, or the termination of the *os sacrum* are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day or a week or even a month old. But suppose they were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*? (Bentham, 1789: Ch17).

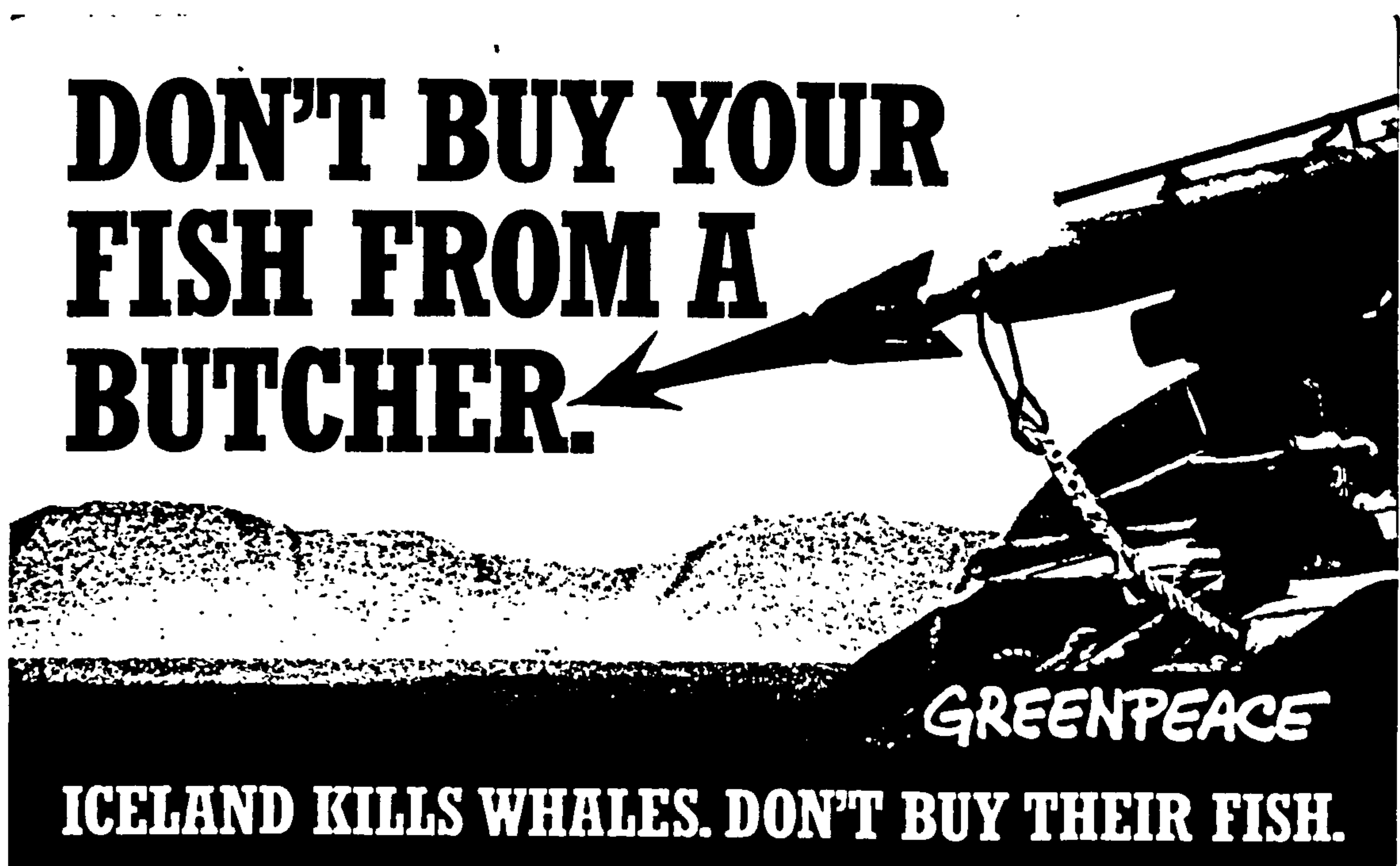
Nonetheless, Jeremy Bentham, in common with most moralists of the period, was concerned only with unnecessary suffering of animals, and did not himself abstain from meat. Singer argues that the "nineteenth century anti-cruelty movement was built on the assumption that the interests of non-human animals deserve protection only when serious human interests are not at stake. Animals remained very clearly lower creatures whose interests must be sacrificed to our own in the event of conflict. The significance of the new animal liberation movement is its challenge to this assumption. Taken in itself, say the animal liberationists, membership of the human species is not morally relevant. Other creatures on our planet also have interests" (Singer, 1985: 4).

The modern animal liberation movement seeks to push the commonly accepted perimeter of the ethical net yet wider, arguing, for example, that if "possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one human to use another for his own needs, how can it entitle humans to exploit non-humans for the same purpose?" (Singer, 1976: 7). Throughout history individuals have discerned what they felt to be unjust abuse by more powerful "in" groups of those who fell outwith the obtaining realm of ethical consideration, resulting in the formation of modern liberation movements,



disputing what is seen as an arbitrary and inequitable division between the users and the used. Past campaigns such as the anti-slavery movement and the feminist movement had considerable success. Today, to discriminate between humans on grounds of faith, gender or skin colour is widely, if not universally, agreed to be ethically unacceptable. Slavery has been officially abolished and in many countries women have made considerable legal advances towards equality of opportunity. In the official ideology of Western society, the principle ethical boundary has been around *Homo sapiens*: we should be considerate to other humans. Other animals, however, have not had remotely comparable rights.

24. Environmental and ethical issues are commonly "linked"



ASSOCIATIONS TEND ALSO to be made *between* revisionary movements. Many informants express a multitude of health and ethical concerns, without being willing or able to draw a clear distinction between one and the other:

*But I also believe that they should have a right to life as well. I don't want to eat anything that's suffered for my benefit. I can't really enjoy food that's suffered. The thing that made me aware in the first place was factory farming, but since then I think I've become aware like most vegetarians that*



*there's a lot of different reasons. There's the health aspects, though that isn't one of my main reasons; and the unwillingness to kill animals, or have them killed for my benefit; and also, if we weren't as a country feeding tons of grain to our animals to produce protein, then I think there'd be a lot more food to go around the rest of the world.*

For the more liberal minded there may be a commonality of interest in extending sympathetic treatment more widely, or in opposing what is seen as unjust exploitation in whatever form it is found. Peter Singer, for example, in his seminal *Animal Liberation*, subtitles the first chapter "or why supporters of liberation for Blacks and Women should support Animal Liberation too" (1976: 1), reasoning that like principles apply. Or as one vegetarian respondent put it:

*And also, the whole thing about being vegetarian has now also become very associated with other things. There are sort of three things that go together, which are the bicycle, being a member of CND, and being vegetarian. So if you're one, you have to be the other two.*

In fact vegetarians exist in every walk of life who do not fit this stereotype, but its existence perhaps reflects an element of truth. Vegetarianism tends to be linked with other "progressive" concerns, as an integral part of a personal set of linked beliefs, although the concerns will of course vary from person to person:

Q. Do you feel angry with people who do eat meat now?

*Yes. I do. I mean, at first it was very strong. Now I get angry, but I don't say so so much. I also get angry with vegetarians who are hypocritical — like when they're in favour of abortion especially.*

An interesting example is the woman who says that she would prefer not to have to buy leather shoes, but does so on the grounds that anything else is bad for her feet. She reconciles this moral dilemma, she says, by buying hand-made shoes from a workers' cooperative, which she sees as a sort of moral counterweight. This linkage of issues can be a problem for the many non-meat-eaters who do not embrace the entire political agenda, as one informant recalls of the church-organised theatre where she first encountered vegetarian arguments:

*I found in the [theatre] and with a lot of people, you started to have the political side, you see. It tended to be very extreme left-wing, which I'm not. And I found, you know, it was very difficult to keep the balance, not being totally one side or the other. It did tend to become political as well as scripture or spiritual; it touched everything. And you need to keep your balance right.*



Attempts to extend the breadth of the ethical net may then inevitably be viewed as politically inspired and threatening, since they challenge what is conventionally regarded as the natural order. Such views tend to be seen as liberal, radical, or socialist, because they oppose the conservative preference for the status quo. Take Bernard Shaw, for example, who lived to the age of 94 on a vegetarian diet, and who professed that "It seems to me, looking at myself... that I am a remarkably superior person, when you compare me with other writers, journalists, and dramatists; and I am perfectly content to put this down to my abstinence from meat" (Cox & Crockett, 1979: 54-5), is said to have become vegetarian mainly because it was the "done thing" amongst the English intellectuals he admired. "Shaw accepted the package that went with the intellectual life of the period — socialism, vegetarianism, rational dress, educational and penal reform, and so on" (McLaughlin, 1978: 53). It is reported that he was converted after reading Shelley, and objected to a carnivorous diet, firstly, since eating fellow creatures was an abomination; secondly, since it was socially harmful, devoting a mass of human labour to animals that could instead be devoted to the breeding and care of human beings; and, thirdly, since it led to the diminution of health and strength (Cox & Crockett, 1979: 54).

25. The vegetarian movement associates itself with a more civilised mentality





MEAT SUPPLIERS do not of course willingly concede the moral high-ground, maintaining the consumption of animal flesh to be a perfectly natural or necessary aspect of human life. If directly asked, a large proportion of the British population might well agree that the rearing of animals for food is indeed justified:

Q. What about people who say that all killing of animals is cruel and unnecessary? Full stop?

*What protein alternatives would you say there are to have?*

*Getting back to the question about whether it's cruel slaughtering animals to feed people, I think to a certain degree that it is, but then again it's a natural part of the food chain. That's what lions do in Africa to live. I know again that they argue that you don't have to kill things to live, when there are other alternatives, but I think that in modern slaughterhouses with modern techniques I don't think that it's unnecessarily cruel, and I think that some of the ethnic, religious forms of slaughtering animals are far crueller than our slaughterhouses.*

Food industry orthodoxy still regards its animal raw materials as little more than meat machines. The meat business is regarded as a business like any other, whose merchandise happens to be made from animals, which normally are specially produced for the purpose:

*The company before I joined them was having all sorts of management problems,... And at that time I was the sales director of [a] sausage manufacturers, so they thought that I could make the fairly quick transition, given that I was sort of interested already. In manufacturing, that is. And that was beef as well — it was to do with creating the raw material from which sausages are made. And that was the start of my involvement. I came here as sales director, and we put things to rights pretty quickly.*

However, whilst seeing meat as a proper component of our diet, a butcher informant agrees that concern at the treatment of animals lies behind declining sales in some sectors of the market:

*I think people are looking at the factory farming systems, and they don't like the idea of life being taken for them to have a meal put in front of them, but I think meat is a very positive, you know, what it puts into society is there. It's part of a balanced diet. We need to have it, and of the food cycle, or part of the diet, there must be meat offered in a choice.*

But the view that meat is an entirely necessary and natural part of the diet has changed from being a matter of common agreement to one of contentious debate, as



exemplified by the concern expressed by many people at the prospect of our young being exposed to the realities of farming:

A local paper called it 'Slaughter School.' But anyone wanting a bloodthirsty spectacle would hardly think of going to the Margaret Dan School for Girls at Bishop's Stortford in Hertfordshire. Its notoriety arises from the fact that, of all the schools in the country which run mini-farms, this seems to have aroused the wrath of vegans — the people who refuse to eat, or use, any meat, fish or egg products.

Particular exception was taken to the killing on the premises of the farm's stock of rabbits and an accusation was made that the school's pupils were forced to watch. But, as one indignant fourth-year girl who has worked on the farm for three years retorted, she has never been forced to watch the slaughter of any animals.

She also reacted strongly to the paper calling the rabbits 'pets'. The school tries to foster a professional farming attitude amongst the girls who work voluntarily on the farm towards animals.

'We discourage them from giving them names,' said headmistress Jill Dalladay. 'This is a very serious attempt to introduce questions of agricultural ethics and to help them come to terms with where their food comes from. It would be wrong to encourage them to treat farm animals as pets.'

And, as 14-year-old Danielle Clark, a volunteer responsible for the rabbits, said, nobody likes to think of the animals having to be killed. 'I put up with it,' she added. 'They all have to die sometime' (Peter Morris, "Bunny business on the farm"; *Guardian*, 23 March 1988)

The industry recognises, of course, that whilst many members of the public have no objection to farming methods, their raw material is highly emotive for others, and that its promotion must be undertaken with care. Accordingly, direct reference to ethical questions pertaining to meat tend not to be intensively pursued; instead a more subtle approach is taken to cultivating a positive ethical image. The British Meat marketing organisation, for instance, established a link in late 1987 with the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association "to launch a promotion designed to increase children's awareness of beef, lamb and pork, and the consumption of meat at school meals [at 300 schools in Gloucestershire]. For every red meat meal bought by children at lunch-times, British Meat contributed 10 pence towards the cost of buying and training a guide dog. A total of £1000 was raised during the four-week promotion, enough to buy and train one guide dog" (*British Meat*, 23.11.1987: 13). That red meat (which symbolises strength, power, and control) is projected as coming to the aid of the blind (a relatively weak and disadvantaged group in society) is curiously appropriate.

The meat industry is consistent in emphasising the importance of supposedly rational influences such as health and economics, over and above the more emotive



matter of ethics. This can partly be accounted for by a deliberate policy of avoiding issues on which the trade might be vulnerable but seems also to be partly due to a genuine lack of understanding of the concern in many people's thought and consequently as a determinant of their behaviour. To the meat industry executive used to thinking of livestock only as productive units, for example, the extent of such alternative conceptions may be difficult to accept:

Q. What about the more moral complaints that some people have about meat?

*I don't know if that's anything like as prodigious as the health aspect. I think that... I've got a philosophy which says that the higher the intellect, the less the common sense. And I think that when you look at the morality of it you always get a thin spectrum of the community who feel sensitively, and I'm not in any way denigrating them, who feel justified in protesting that "we don't wear fur coats and we don't kill animals actually for food" and so on and so forth. And there's nothing wrong with that. We're democratic, and we feel that a certain section of the population ought to be allowed to express themselves in that way as long as they keep it within the limits of the law. But I wouldn't say that that would have a major influence. Nothing like the influence of people listening to the medical evidence. That's my feeling. I hear it, but I think it has nothing like the influence of people coming away from meat because they felt that it was the inappropriate thing for their health. Relative to the moral question I think that that sort of thing would be relatively large. Although it gets publicity which is probably disproportional. It hangs there, as a sort of afterthought, perhaps if they're already thinking of the health thing then perhaps it's there in the background... by the way.*

However, when a representative of the British Meat & Livestock Commission says that...

Recent reports from the Vegetarian Society show that it recognises that debate of the ethical issues will not achieve many converts and that it intends to concentrate on welfare, conservation and health issues... (Harrington, 1985: 4)

...it is not obvious what can be meant by ethical concerns, if such issues are excluded. Welfare, conservation, and even health, are indivisible from ethical considerations:

*I suppose at university I noticed things on notice boards and things. That's what woke me up. I had actually worked on a pig farm as a holiday job at university, and the conditions there were so bad! It's quite surprising considering that it was owned by the Ministry. And all the sows were kept in sow stalls — crates — all day long except for cleaning; and then one day they asked me to help with the castration — to castrate these piglets. They said I had about twenty of them to do. I think I managed about three and then... I*



*turned white. Even then though I wasn't particularly considering going vegetarian.*

Many signs suggest that ethical issues have indeed been significantly influential in changing attitudes to meat, although the process is considerably more subtle than a straightforward matter of individuals immediately eschewing meat on coming to rational moral decisions. To understand the meat system in its ethical context, it is useful to consider the issues as a sort of spectrum, rather than to see each particular cause in isolation. In this way we can identify a range of attitudes, from the most narrowly conservative, who might argue that we have social responsibilities only for ourselves as individuals and for our families, and for whom unbridled exploitation of any being outwith that sphere is legitimate activity, to the broadest and most liberal, who might extend appropriate consideration to their entire environment, living and inanimate.

RELIGIONS are sometimes regarded as the ultimate arbiters of ethical behaviour, at least by their adherents. It is interesting, therefore, to consider the various views of the correct treatment of animals by humans within different religious bodies at different times, and particularly their ideas about using meat.

One of the most influential treatments of this subject in recent years has been that of Lynn White jnr. (1977), who suggests that Christian theology has had the effect of legitimising a fundamentally exploitative relationship between humans and the rest of the natural world, and is thus a root cause of the modern ecological crisis, an argument which has since been hotly disputed.

There is little disagreement that, over the years, church dogma has usually condoned the prevailing use of animals as rightful expression of the natural hierarchy. The Bible, to which millions still look for spiritual guidance, has generally been interpreted as suggesting that it is perfectly proper to kill for food or for sacrifice. A Catholic Dictionary describes animals as "not created by God, but... derived with their bodies from their parents by natural generation" (Addis & Arnold, 1924: 31), and Roman Catholic commentaries still tend to hold that "We have no duties of justice or charity towards them [but only] duties concerning them and the right use we make of them" (Davis, 1946: 258). Certainly, God's message has sometimes been interpreted in ways



that today sound ineffably anthropocentric, as for example when the nineteenth century naturalist, William Swainson, suggested that God had created the chicken in order to show "perfect contentment in a state of partial confinement" (n.d.: 262).

In curious resonance with the common assumption, noted in Chapter 5, that the origin of the human species can be dated to the point at which we began to hunt and kill other animals, many theologians and lay Christians ascribe the beginning of human meat eating to the Fall, (whereafter one could say humans have had to live in the "real world"), much as in Hebrew lore, Noah is said to have been the first non-vegetarian (Chiltosky, 1975: 235-244)<sup>1</sup>.

Commentators argued as to whether meat-eating had been permitted because man's physical constitution had degenerated and therefore required new forms of nutriment, or because the cultivation of the soil to which he was condemned required a more robust food, or because the fruits and herbs on which he had fed in Eden has lost their former goodness. But everyone agreed that meat-eating symbolized man's fallen condition (Thomas, 1983: 289).

Nowhere in the Gospels is there any explicit statement recorded on the part of Jesus that cruelty to animals is one of the great sins (Niven, 1967: 23), and the Bible explicitly tells us that God created Man in His own image to have dominion over "every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Genesis, 1: 28). This idea, more than any other, writes Andrew Linzey, "has characterised much Christian thinking about our treatment of animals. The standard historical interpretation of this verse is that we may use animals for our own betterment and happiness. But this interpretation," he continues, "vastly influential as it has been in the past, finds little theological support today" (Linzey, 1985: 11).

Andrew Linzey sets out to demonstrate that the gospels are not in fact as anthropocentric as they have long been interpreted to be. "If this is right", he says, "it means nothing less than for centuries Christians have misinterpreted their own scripture and have read into it implications that simply were not there" (1985: 10). Linzey points out, for example, that in verses 29 and 30 of Genesis 1, humans are

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<sup>1</sup> Likewise, for the Cherokee, legend has it that before the "big flood" and the "coming of the birds, animals and insects to the earth" there were only a few talking dogs (which were probably not eaten) (Chiltosky, 1975: 235-244).



"commanded to eat 'every plant yielding seed' and 'every tree with seed in its fruit' for food, that is, to be vegetarian... It is hardly likely if the concept of dominion meant absolute power over animals that there should be a divine prohibition concerning the eating of them" (1985: 11-12):

That animals belong to God and therefore have a worth and value must follow of course from their creation. "And God saw everything that he had made and behold it was very good" as Genesis summarises it (1: 31). It is the essential *goodness* of the world and of all earthly things that has long been recognised as one of the features of the Jewish tradition. In the New Testament, Jesus underlines even the value of sparrows which in his day were sold for a few pennies (Mt. 6: 25-34)... Despite the scriptural support to the contrary, many Christians have interpreted this superiority in ways that have belittled or disregarded the intrinsic worth of all creation... But it is important to note here that this view does not stem from a direct examination of the value of animals, but from *theodicy*, that is, the problem of reconciling the will of God with the apparent evil and suffering in the world (Linzey, 1985: 10).

It is significant that modern commentators can find biblical justification for views which contradict so many traditional assumptions. Perhaps the most interesting question, however, must be why at one period the Bible is interpreted with utter certainty to express humankind's unrivalled supremacy in the natural order, and why it is now re-interpreted to present a qualitatively different image. The reason for this revisionism is clear:

It can indeed be argued that Greek and Stoic influence distorted the Jewish legacy so as to make the religion of the New Testament much more man-centred than that of the Old; Christianity, it can be said, teaches, in a way that Judaism has never done, that the whole world is subordinate to man's purposes. Fortunately, modern theological argument about the actual meaning of the Bible is irrelevant to our present purpose. It is not necessary here to determine whether or not Christianity is in itself intrinsically anthropocentric. The point is that in the early modern period its leading English exponents, the preachers and commentators, undoubtedly were. In due course, Christian doctrines would be drawn upon to buttress an altogether different view of man's relationship to animals. But at the start of our period exploitation, not stewardship, was the dominant theme (Thomas, 1983: 24-25).

As Keith Thomas suggests, whether or not the Bible is explicit in placing low value on the lives of non-human animals is of little relevance here. What really matters is how it is interpreted. Peter Singer comments that when it is said that God created Man in His own image, we might fairly regard this as man creating God in his own image (Singer, 1976: 204). Little, it seems, has changed. In much the same way as



it was suggested in Chapter 10 that science very often provides the answers that its public wishes to be given, so too religious teaching is anything but free of its cultural context. Modern theologians are coming to revise their interpretation of the Bible's doctrine on the subject of environmental ethics, because the subject is of deep concern to a significant part of their public, and because the social consensus of the issue has been changing.

IN THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION, as elsewhere in Western culture, meat has broadly stood for human power in the mortal world. With the ultimate blessing of divine proclamation, meat has long been employed as a symbol of the demigod-like status of humanity. God is said to have created humans in His own image, and given us dominion over every living thing. In structural terms, we thus position ourselves relative to the rest of creation as we believe God is to us: omnipotent. (Science and technology have meanwhile endeavoured to emulate God's omniscience and omnipresence, by which our worldly divinity might be complete.)

When Abel, son of Adam and Eve, sacrificed his beasts to the Lord, or when Noah made burnt offerings to thank God for the subsiding of the flood, the symbolic potency of their use of animals can be attributed to this idea. If human power over the mortal world is represented by cooking and eating meat, then destruction of animals by the extreme mediation of fire can be interpreted as unequivocal acknowledgement of God's greater might: as acceptance that our worldly power ultimately derives from the higher being's unworldly power, to which homage must be paid. The institution of animal sacrifice troubles Linzey, whose perspective is also compatible with the principle of acknowledging a higher order of power, which does not negate our earthly control, but notionally transcends it:

It surely is difficult to know how a God who freely creates animals out of love could delight in their gratuitous destruction. It seem possible that what Christians have often taken to be a wholly destructive system of expiation for sin was in fact *as understood by its practitioners* to be a practical sign that all life belonged and returned to God (Linzey, 1985: 12; italics in original).

Indeed, the inverted logic by which at Christian communion we physically consume what is held, by transubstantiation, to be the literal body of Christ, where by



a double negation of normal values we cannibalistically consume a being greater than ourselves, and so absorb some of His essential spiritual strength, can also be interpreted as obliquely serving to sanction our mundane consumption of lesser beings. Meat in this case is yet the archetypical representation of control, but in these contexts alone its role is to demonstrate that our power is limited: we are masters only of all we survey; the supernatural is beyond our grasp.

Meat is the food most strongly proscribed on fast-days: days when the greater glory of God is especially to be honoured. Thus Trappist monks have long abstained from meat, considering it a luxury incompatible with their vows of simplicity (Majumder, 1972). This goes back at least to mediaeval days, when vegetarianism was widespread amongst the devout. At that time, rejection of meat occurred in a context of denial of the flesh that drew directly on manichaeian conceptions of bodily affairs as "totally evil, all nature as corruption, and the cessation of physical being as the proper end" (Twigg, 1983: 19). In this predominantly negative concept, Twigg argues, there was little sense of vegetarian food being in any way "higher" food, as is common in some circles today. However, by its reputation as *less* defiling, it does indicate a view of meat as *more* strongly associated with love of profanity. The church has a long history of commending its avoidance when spiritual control is held to be the particular ambition of good Christians:

Encratism existed within the Christian movement from its earliest days. Although the early church was broadly in favour of asceticism (encouraged by the Hellenistic cultural context, and ante-ceded by Jewish secular asceticism), encratites demanded it. This involved abstaining from marriage and sex, the eating of meat, and the drinking of wine. This stemmed from a world view that saw creation as essentially evil. Encratism became quite popular in the first centuries of the church. (Cecire, 1985) (abstract on US theses Database).

Meanwhile the permission to eat meat was regarded as a concession to human weakness, not a command. For the pagan writers Seneca and Porphyry, voluntary abstinence from flesh had symbolized the triumph of the spirit over the body; many austere medieval Christians deliberately renounced meat for the same reason (fish remained acceptable, partly because they were bloodless, partly because they were not produced by sexual congress) (Thomas, 1983: 289).

Today meat still stands for mere earthly power, and in spite of the revisionism of a few modern theologians, many Christians are troubled by the problem of reconciling their religion's intrinsic cosmology, whose roots lie in the ancient Hebrew



world, with twentieth century experience. The interpretation and application of the church's teaching on human dominion, as it is still widely perceived, may seem to be at odds with its basic message of compassion. This concern is expressed, for example, by a semi-vegetarian woman whose spare time is largely devoted to church activities:

*Because I know that — as I said earlier, obviously I'm a Christian — and I know we were given anything virtually to enjoy... But, I don't think God ever imagined that we were going to treat creatures in the way that we do. I don't know, maybe I'm making a lot out of it... Well, it's kind of restrictive in a way: something that you feel God wants you to do which the church doesn't like. So you sit on your hands and keep quiet... And as long as you're patient and love people, then, eventually, God has His way. But, it's quite stressful in some ways.*

THE WORLD'S OTHER MAJOR SPIRITUAL TEACHINGS share many elements in common with Christianity in their attitudes to meat, if not always in their view of the proper human attitude to the natural world. "Concern for animal suffering can be found in Hindu thought, and the Buddhist idea of compassion is a universal one, extending to animals as well as humans" (Singer, 1985: 2). These religions have long counselled to a greater or lesser degree against the eating of meat, even where there is no shortage of animal foods (Dwyer *et al*, 1973).

Eastern teachings typically regard earthly life as limited or illusory, with transcendence above mere daily affairs the major goal for the individual (Smart, 1969). From this point of view, meat is a temptation to be avoided, not only because cruelty is considered to engender insensitivity, but also because the enjoyment of meat is a sign of attachment to mere worldly power, whereas spiritual strength is the true objective to be pursued. In India, for example, vegetarianism, is recognised by the whole of the Hindu population as the superior form of diet and as a reflection of high civilisation; it is therefore particularly practiced by Brahmans as a sign of social and spiritual stature (Dumont, 1972: 190-195). This is true not only of Eastern mystical teachings. Partial or total abstinence from meat, as a sign of voluntary simplicity or as an act of self-discipline, is an almost mandatory aspect of prescribed paths to enlightenment ranging from Hatha Yoga to Seventh Day Adventism (Bernard, 1982: 85n; Todhunter, 1973).

Norms do not of course always precisely match practice. Whilst it is a Buddhist principle, for example, that one "may not knowingly deprive any creature of



life, not even a worm or an ant" (Westermarck, 1924: 497), not all are in practice reluctant to eat flesh. "In many Buddhist areas, including Tibet, Ceylon, Burma and Thailand, even Buddhist priests eat meat" (Simoons, 1961: 10). Similarly, in parts of India such as eastern Uttar Pradesh even Brahmans will eat meat (Dumont, 1972: 184). In "the Middle East and the Mediterranean area too, vegetarian practices have generally been observed scrupulously only by clergy and the very devout. Vegetarianism was common in ancient Persia only in the priestly and learned class of the Magi" (Simoons, 1961: 11). The Mandaean of Iraq and Iran are also reported to regard animal slaughter as immoral and degrading, and so to be apologetic for their sinfulness when doing so (Drowser, 1937: 48, 50). However scrupulously proscriptions may or may not be observed by fallible mortals, the contrast between the conventional attitude to meat in such belief systems, and that of the interpretations of orthodox Christianity, is nonetheless striking.

Whilst Christian ethics have pervaded the world under the patronage of Western economics, Eastern spiritual influences have increasingly circulated in the West in recent years. Buddhism, Hinduism, and other derivative sects, have been a significant factor in changing, or at least catalysing change in, many people's views of meat, including several informants:

*I'd felt uneasy about meat for a long time, I suppose, but I'd never let it really bother me too much — until I moved into a house sharing with a couple who were both Buddhists. They'd been sort of converted when they'd spent a couple of years in Asia, and got even more into it when they got back and began to see Britain with different eyes... Until I talked to them about it I'd never really known what Buddhism was about at all, and it's not like I would call myself that now or anything... but it did make me realise that the way we treat animals — and especially eating meat — isn't just cruel to them, but it has a horrible effect on us ourselves too. And I think I just wanted to stop, once I'd sort of realised that.*

Q. So, what did get you into it [vegetarianism]?

*Well, the Hare Krisnas. A friend of mine was visiting the Hare Krisna centre and she became vegetarian, and then she came round and I was sitting there eating my sausages and she just reminded me of all the suffering it had caused. And it had never occurred to me that meat caused suffering. It was just something that I ate. And I've not eaten meat from that day. Just like that.*

Q. What? Had you never even thought of it before?

*No, never. It was just the right time. That was six years ago.....*

Q. What does Hare Krisna teach then?

*It's because they're trying to develop a peaceful state, and if you're eating something that's going to involve suffering and bloodshed then... it's like what you eat. It affects your consciousness, and it's just completely*



*unnecessary to cause violence towards animals. They consider all life to be sacred — even plant life — though they do eat plants. They make it as an offering to God. You can't eat anything at all until it's been offered to Krishna.*

Similar ideas have also found an outlet in Western society through such avenues as the growing popularity of meditative practices, which typically place considerable emphasis on the need for the participant to improve their entire way of life, including their diet, to achieve the desired progress. The popularity of such teachings, perhaps particularly amongst the young, can be seen as the fulfilling of a spiritual need in a society disillusioned with its own traditions. If, as seems to be the case, the consensus of public feeling has been shifting in favour of extending a degree of ethical consideration further than the human species, such teachings provide an alternative to the revisionism that has occurred within Christianity, as a spiritual basis for a more enlightened attitude to our dealings with ourselves, and with the planet upon which we live.



# 14

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## Ecology

Unfortunately human control of nature, with all its resources, has not been without a price. As technology has advanced, so accordingly has human impact on the natural world, resulting in the great modern problems known as the four P's: population, pollution, peace and poverty .

— BROOKS, 1967: 1712

First, let us compare the ecology movement with others of historical times. An example the springs to mind is the movement for the abolition of slavery a century ago. The abolitionists succeeded in revolutionising the image of man. In the same way, the ecology movement will succeed in changing the idea of nature... It will succeed... partly because of its dedication and mostly because the time is ripe.

— DOUGLAS, 1975: 231

THE RANGE OF SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS associated with meat eating is remarkable. The litany of sins associated with its production could almost give the impression that meat alone is largely responsible for bringing the world to a state of ecological crisis. The dangers may be real and the connections by which meat is blamed for worsening them genuine but the fact that it is so widely indicted in such contexts is because meat consumption is also an apt *symbol* for incrimination. Meat still represents environmental control but today that also has negative implications for many people, superseding the predominantly positive meanings of the past.

It is an issue on which the meat industry is vulnerable, as many within the trade are clearly aware. Marketing projects a deliberate image of timeless tradition and of nature, in an effort to reassure the consumer about the wholesome simplicity of



the product. Such efforts are, however, of limited efficacy, amongst a public increasingly aware that the typical depiction of cattle peacefully grazing picturesque rolling countryside bear little resemblance to the conditions in which most contemporary livestock are actually reared. Meat producers therefore face an urgent need to find new ways to defend their industry's environmental rôle. This is reflected, for example, in the trade press promotion of a new guidebook by a market research group "to inform business people about the full implications of the environmental movement... [It] covers 56 different green issues including worldwide resources, promoting a green company image, and information sources on green issues" (*Meat Trades Journal*, 24 July 1989: 8).

Perhaps the most common negative perception of meat in terms of the ecology of the planet — repeatedly referred to by informants and in the mass media — is its association with poverty and starvation amongst the world's politically and economically disadvantaged. At its simplest, it is seen as unjust that the West has food literally to waste, and meat in plenty, whilst people elsewhere die of starvation. Such sentiments are not confined to vegetarians, but are expressed by many conventional meat-eaters, including a male sheep farmer and a middle-aged woman with a family:

*And I think that issue about the West's consumption of meat, and world distribution of food — I think that had an effect on me. I had read a bit about that, not long before I actually became vegetarian.*

*I mean, we pay farmers not to grow, but if they did grow then we could feed some people with it. It's all so crazy! Oh, absolutely pathetic. What a carry on.*

*And it's the whole guilt thing about people on the other side of the world not having enough food to get them through the day; it's the whole... Food has become a terrible... guilt... problem.*

Such misgivings may be increased by information on the relatively low energy efficiency of meat production — such as that the conversion of grain into animal flesh requires on average ten calories to be used for every calorie provided for human consumption, or five grams of protein input for the production of one gram of meat protein; for beef the ratio is more like twenty-to-one (Pimental & Pimental, 1979: 52; Wilson & Lawrence, 1985: 25; Cox, 1986: 193). In 1981 the Soviet bloc consumed 126 million tons of grain while their animals consumed 186 million tons (Crittenden, 1981). However, such data are hardly new. In his *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith was well aware that a "cornfield of moderate fertility produces a much greater quantity of food



for man than the best pasture of equal extent" (1776: 131). It has been calculated that the present population of England could be fed from 10 million acres of the existing 46 million acres of agricultural land, if plant foods were grown and eaten directly (Williams, 1977).

The wealthy West is seen not only to fail to share available foods equitably, but also to appropriate other people's resources through their economic advantage — often from the poorest people of the poorest nations who can least afford it. Roughly 18% of European animal production is on the basis of imported feedstuffs, with about 14.5 m. hectares in the "3rd World" serving as pasture for European livestock; in Senegal about 30% of cultivated land performs this function; Ethiopia exports protein that would feed around one million people annually (Busacker, 1985: 17). This is a major influence with one woman who avoids meat for "political reasons" but who is not entirely vegetarian:

*Oh yeah, certainly. I find a great issue the import of foodstuffs from the Third World for animals, like a lot of soybeans grown, or groundnuts, or... I don't know what else goes into meat production here. And then you produce, among other things, beef "mountains"... There are lots of reasons for not eating meat, but there are no reasons for never ever eating meat.*

*I get annoyed because McDonalds have obviously got a very busy PR department who are continually writing to papers saying "we don't use beef from tropical rainforest. Aren't we good!" — but what they don't say is where their meat does come from, or where the stuff they are fed on comes from. Quite likely from tropical rainforest!*

Orthodox economic experts object that such analyses are simplistic, and that meat production can serve a positive role in so-called developing countries. In Botswana for example, beef accounts for 10-20% of GDP and is an important source of foreign currency to a country whose environment is suggested to be suited to little else (Opschoor, 1985: 18). Some draw parallels with how the English appetite for meat is said to have bailed out the poverty-stricken North of Scotland in the seventeenth century by providing cash for a by-product of low-value pasture (Mitchison, 1985: 3). It is even suggested that reducing Western meat consumption without changing production methods could act as a barrier to the self-sufficiency of less developed countries, by leading to the dumping of surpluses on world markets which undercut local produce (Mather, 1985: 38). To others, however, the significant parallels are with the infamous Scottish Highland Clearances in which the indigenous population was



evicted from its lands in favour of livestock for distant wealthy markets. Such arguments are in any case of limited importance; attitudes are as likely governed by simple feelings of injustice:

*Especially nowadays when there's actually a surplus of — in brackets — a surplus of meat. It'd be okay if they could get things sussed out so they were actually going to feed the people that are needing it, but that's a quantum leap. There's no government that's ever going to.*

The relationships by which meat is implicated in environmentally damaging processes, with the probable consequence of further worsening food shortages for many people, can be complex. Demand for grazing land, responding to American, European, and domestic markets' craving for beef, is a principle cause of global deforestation. This demand is normally met by large commercial enterprises, sometimes through the agency of local populations displaced from their traditional lands. Expansion of grazing is largely at the expense of forest — as is regularly documented:

The Body Shop is asking its customers to sign letters to the president of Brazil, José Sarney, calling for action to halt the burning of tropical rainforest by ranchers seeking new pastures to produce meat for the world's hamburger chains (*Scotland on Sunday*, 23 July 1989: 29).

Flying over Amazonia, it seems almost inconceivable that the forests stretching for mile upon mile below, over an area almost the size of Australia, could be in jeopardy. But one has only to travel up the TransAmazonia Highway in either direction out of Altimira and the threat is all too clear. On both sides of the road, the forest has been cleared as far as the eye can see. For the most part, it has been cleared for cattle ranching. Today, there are over 8 million cattle in Brazilian Amazonia. Meat production is extremely inefficient (50kg/ hectare/ year), making ranching an activity which is so wholly uneconomic that it would probably never have been undertaken on the present scale if the Brazilian Government, with aid from the World Bank and other multilateral development banks, has not poured \$2 billion into subsidizing the cattle industry in Amazonia (Hildyard, 1989: 53).

It has been calculated, for example, that when rainforest is cleared for raising cattle, the cost of each hamburger produced in the first year of production is about half a tonne of mature forest, since such forest naturally supports about 800,000 kilos of plants and animals per hectare, the area of which under pasture will yield some 1,600 hamburgers:

The price of that meal-in-a-bun is anything up to nine square metres of irreplaceable natural wealth — the richness and diversity of the



rainforest which may never be recreated when the grazing lands are in due course abandoned (*New Internationalist*, July 1987, reporting *World Food Association Bulletin*, Nos. 3 & 4, 1986).

Western-style intensive development commonly causes polarisation of incomes in the areas affected — in Botswana for example 75% of cash income accrues to 10% of the farmers (Opschoor, 1985: 18) — with the less powerful losing access to food production and facing migration or starvation. Loss of primary forest has many associated consequences such as rapid soil loss, sometimes to the point of desertification, and changes to the hydrological cycle implicated in global climatic change. Deforestation can reduce rainfall by 10-15% in tropical areas, with frightening potential (Bunyard, 1985: 19-20). Some see the ecological and social devastation of the economically disadvantaged nations as an early warning system for the future consequences of current industrial policies in the Western world:

Already local people complain of changes in the weather — the rains coming less frequently and more unpredictably. Indeed, scientists warn that deforestation is so disrupting the hydrological cycles which ensure the recycling of rainfall throughout Amazonia, that areas of unaffected forest downwind of deforested areas could be lost to desiccation rather than outright burning... The fear is that the process could go beyond the greenhouse effect... and actually change the chemistry of the atmosphere to such an extent that the higher mammals might not be able to survive... Fanciful as the idea of a climatic flip might seem, it is well to remember that for the greater part of the history of the planet, the atmosphere of the earth was such that it could only maintain bacterial forms of life (Hildyard, 1989: 59).

[The] last thirty years have been the most disastrous in the history of most, if not all, Third World countries. There has been massive deforestation, soil erosion and desertification. The incidence of floods and droughts has increased dramatically as has their destructiveness, population growth has surged, as has urbanisation, in particular the development of vast shanty-towns, in which human life has attained a degree of squalor probably unprecedented outside Hitler's concentration camps. With such developments, have come increased malnutrition and hunger; so much so, that today we are witnessing for the first time in human history, famine on a *continental scale*, with two-thirds of African countries to some degree affected (Goldsmith, 1985: 210).

Another environmental cost levelled at meat production is consumption of non-renewable resources. Today Europe uses only 6.5% of the world's cropland to produce 28% of the world's meat. This seemingly excellent productivity is bought at the expense of high resource inputs: particularly energy, metal, and phosphates. Resource



use runs at around 8 times that of poorer nations, though China is reported to achieve comparable productivity by intensive use of labour (Stewart, 1985: 5).

Profit-orientation also tends to increase applications of pesticides and fertilisers and the use of modern machinery, with many of the problems first experienced in the Green Revolution (Stewart, 1985: 4; Busacker, 1985: 17-18). Amongst the concerns is the escape of pesticides into the environment, and developing viral immunity to antibiotics in both humans and other animals due to the routine medication of farm stock to promote rapid weight gain (Teherani-Kronner, 1985: 12; Cox, 1986: 106-8).

One ecological consequence of intensive farming methods that has become a political issue in recent years is nitrification of drinking water. Liquid manure from intensive animal husbandry is a major contributor. In many parts of the UK, nitrate levels in the public water supply regularly exceed European safety thresholds, which is reputedly linked with "blue baby syndrome" in human infants. Nitrification is also blamed for acid rain, through a complex system of influences. Nitrogen from farmland is leached into the groundwater, and presently find its way into the river networks, and from there into the seas. Observations of algal blooms in the North Sea in recent years are attributed to this increase in water fertility, the decomposition of which produce high concentrations of sulphur, which interacts with seawater and sunlight to produce atmospheric sulphuric acid. As much as 30% of acid rain falling in Scandinavia may be from this source. Also linked with acid rain formation, and with global warming and climate changes as a greenhouse-gas, is methane directly produced by farm animals. Methane may be building up in the atmosphere at a rate of around 1% per annum, with consequences impossible to compute (Bunyard, 1985: 19-20).

The 'greenhouse effect' could be avoided if we all adopted a mainly vegetarian diet, according to T.R. Vidyasagar of the Max Planck Institute for Biophysical Chemistry in Gottingen, West Germany.

Green plants play a crucial role in the global carbon economy because they can use solar energy to convert carbon dioxide into other carbon compounds, which serve as building blocks and a source of energy both for plants and animals. Trees are particularly effective, locking up large quantities of carbon in their wood...

Vidyasagar calculates that a world-wide halt to the consumption of the products of grain-fed livestock, combined with the adoption of a healthy vegetarian diet, would have important consequences.

With an average per capita consumption of 200 kg of grain per year, only about 60 per cent of the land now under cultivation would be needed to feed the present world population. With advancing technology, this 60 per cent



should be sufficient to provide for the needs of the projected world population into the next century.

Not only would this prevent further deforestation: it would allow something like 40 per cent of the present agricultural land to be reforested. As the trees grew there would be a large-scale absorption of atmospheric carbon monoxide (*Guardian "Futures"*, 1. May 1987).

Blood sports are also accused of having various negative environmental consequences, not least of which is the sheer extent of land sometimes devoted exclusively to the maintenance of high stocks of the quarry, as for example in the Scottish grouse moors. Such land, it is complained, could otherwise be put to purposes such as forestry that would be of a wider benefit to society, or be allowed to revert to a more natural state, to the benefit of wildlife. The lead shot used in shooting is also reported to pollute land, particularly in areas of high acidity such as the open moors on which shooting commonly takes place (BBC Radio 4 PM, letters, 15 Aug. 1989). The lead weights traditionally used in fishing are similarly blamed for polluting water courses, and broken nylon fishing line threatens bird and aquatic life (*Comment*, Channel 4 TV, c. August 1989):

*Yes, I suppose it annoys me to think of so much of the country being sterilised really, so that a few wealthy people can spend their holidays blasting birds to bits.*

Restaurants and hotels are adopting a low-flying attitude to the Glorious Twelfth this year because of fears of demonstrations by opponents of grouse shooting...

Anti-blood-sports bodies have mounted a campaign against grouse shooting, targeting both the suffering and death of the birds and environmental pollution by lead shot (*Scotsman*, 11 Aug. 1989: 3).

Expansion of beef production can produce milk disposal problems, particularly in Eastern countries where consumption of dairy products is not part of the cultural tradition (Stewart, 1985: 5). Livestock production also has its effect on the appearance of the countryside. Any change in meat production levels or methods would inevitably have such consequences, just as considerable changes have already occurred throughout history. With fewer ruminants, large tracts of countryside might transfer to vegetable-growing land, forest, scrub, wildlife reserve, prairie, or recreational space (Korbey, 1985: 14).



OPINION IS DIVIDED about the best strategy for remedying such problems as they become recognised. Two broad orientations emerge from the debate, with many possible positions ranged along a continuum in between. These alternative orientations are in many ways comparable to the opposing views of the natural world developed in Chapter 1.

The first, characteristically adhered to by those in positions of advantage in the *status quo*, for whom science, technology, and industry have brought many benefits, is that humanity's manipulation of nature, on the road to civilisation and affluence, may have produced a few unforeseen and undesirable side-effects, but that there is little or no problem that further applications of science and technology cannot resolve, with sufficient attention from experts. The problem in this conception is insufficient development, rather than too much. Far from regarding it as environmentally unsound, those involved in meat production tend to see their activity as a benign use of land resources:

*But the one argument, for myself being a producer of red meat, is some of the silly arguments you see portrayed on the television, particularly to children. When they're told that chicken and fish are probably the best type of meats to eat, and that should be in their diet. And they're trying to knock red meat on the head. That's crazy. We can convert grass into good forms of protein — ie red meat — and that makes sense: good economic sense. Then again, we have these vast plains and fields, and we've got to utilise grass, which is something which can be converted into meat. You know, I can understand [complaints about] pigs indoors, and chickens and what have you, but they're looking at more extensive systems for that type of system now.*

Individuals of this persuasion, such as the meat industry executive in the following interview, commonly regard those who express concern at the perceived excesses of human activity as naïvely led astray by exaggerated media reports, malinformed, idealistic, or worse:

O. I'd still like to go back to my previous question, about this whole "environmental" debate that been going on recently. How do you feel personally about these issues? How serious are the world's environmental problems? What solutions do you see?

*Well, I like to see things kept as naturally as possible, but you've got to look at the commercial overlay, or necessity... that countries must develop... I think that as long as there are watchdog measures that make good, common sense, then we have enough natural wit to keep the balance between commercial profit and containment actually of desirable elements in the environment... I don't think that things will get totally out of order in the way that the media latch onto it, and certainly show it to be... Okay, we're now looking at improvements. We're fortunate enough to have a perceptive supplier of*



*polystyrene trays, who is assuring us now, for the benefit of our retailers, that he in effect is according with the requirements as far as ozone is concerned. I think that a momentum has built up actually. A lot of people latch onto these things who are looking to see what else they can get up to... You've got to also watch the vested interests as well. When you think about environmentalists actually you've got a body of people actually who are charged with looking after the environment, and if they see that they've got not an awful lot to do then they worry about their job security and so on and so forth, and everything that happens that causes them to have to search for further powers, work longer hours, and employ more people, actually is delightful. Because the rationale of that is that you've got total job security, and I wonder if there's a bit of Parkinson's law in all that as well in many respects.*

Those on the other pole of the debate typically regard the environmental problems which have increasingly come to the public's attention in recent years as inherent in industrial culture, and by definition incapable of rectification by further technological fixes. Adherents to this position often take a longer-term and more global view of the problems afflicting natural systems than is common amongst their detractors, observing, for example, that the modern environmental crisis is new only in its extent:

*The European expansionism of the last five hundred years has overshadowed — indeed, nearly totally eclipsed — the lessons that we should have learned from the repeated decline and collapse of ancient agricultural civilizations. This has led to a potentially fatal cultural blind-spot as to the vulnerability of our current industrial system of agriculture. Because of its experiences between roughly 1450 and 1950 — a period marked by seemingly unlimited expansion — the Western industrial world now finds itself conceptually ill-equipped to understand, and politically impotent to address, the problems of ecological adjustment that currently face all societies in a finite world (Weiskel, 1989: 99).*

A curious example of these contradictory positions is provided by the following conversation between a livestock farmer and his wife, who between them develop many crucial features of the debate:

*GERRY But coming back to... the whole country... you know, if people weren't eating meat, the countryside would alter dramatically, because you wouldn't have the stock in the fields. The moors, and places that can't be farmed for the production of veg that have relied on the production of sheep, would alter dramatically. And you're losing a bit of heritage perhaps, in the sense that you can't let the likes of the Lake District go wild, or some of the moors in Scotland. You know, what would happen to them? How would the, kind of, the ecosystem evolve or change without that form of grazing livestock? Because no matter what you think, if it's not going to be viable then people*



wouldn't have sheep running on the hill. You might have the odd wild roaming flock going around, but it won't be farmed properly.

Q. The Vegetarian lobby might argue that for the land to grow the food that goes into an animal you can grow quite a lot more non-animal food... it might be more efficient.

GERRY Yes, well I can see that argument, but then there are places like our marsh, and places in the lake district, where there's nothing else will grow there. Just grasses... that's all they're good for, is growing grass, which is basically just a free commodity in certain areas. And there again, if you're looking for a system where you are growing healthy food all of the time, where are you going to find naturally organic fertilisers to put back into the system again, apart from perhaps our own waste products that could be transferred back to the soil? Also, the slash and burn policy of some of these tribes that are purely on a vegetarian type diet. Now that is not a good thing in some respects, is it? That's harmful.

Q. Sure. Many other societies have been just as negligent as us. But perhaps we're much more powerful because of technology, and just in sheer numbers.....

GERRY They've proved on the Nile deltas and places like that, even there they totally exhausted the natural vegetation and the soils and things, and with having slashed down the natural vegetation their ports all silted up. And you could see how things went. It's appalling. But today they have things like vast great digging machines and what have you that can go in there and un-silt rivers and things like that today. That's where man has progressed. Nature really now cannot stand in his way.

LINDA But maybe nature has its ways of getting its own back...

GERRY ...well, you can talk about an earthquake. What's that, nature getting its own back?

LINDA No, I'm talking about slash and burn, it's that various human beings are making money out of slashing and burning rainforest, and taking out of nature. And nature gets its own back by flooding vast areas of countryside, because the water isn't held up in the rainforest.

GERRY Well, certainly if the countries haven't got the financial wealth behind them to kind of dam... and put banks up around the rivers — to be aware of the flooding problems. It's being sorted out here, where we're sitting now. It's prone to floods, and the last major flood here was in the fifties. But now they've spent a lot of money on it, and they've really only just completed the sea defences around the corner, but this place is now safe.

Q. Even if the sea rises by several metres?

GERRY Yes, I think that they've taken that into consideration in putting these sea walls in. Because you can see that the people who had the lovely sea views from the front of their houses have lost that totally now.

Q. So on the whole you're fairly confident that human technology can cope with most problems as and when they arise?

GERRY If it has the financial backing. Yes, certainly. Not necessarily as they arise, but given time they are aware that, like with flood plains, there's no problem in the Western world with floods.

LINDA Not in the Western world, maybe no, but I'm talking about South America, and Africa and places like that. I mean, if there's a huge drought in Ethiopia then we can go on shipping food in for as long as we like but it's not going to cure the problem, is it?

GERRY Yes, but areas like that anyway, they are arid but when they do have monsoons and rains it's like a huge flash flood.

Q. It's perhaps worth mentioning that at the turn of this century most of Ethiopia was forested, and now only a small proportion is.....



GERRY *Slash and burn.*

Q. Well, some is by commercial forestry, and also, when the local people do cut trees down, it's often because of economic pressures of all sorts, partly at least from the West. It can be that or starve.

LINDA *And also, the other side of that, especially in Ethiopia, now that they've not got so much wood there, they dry the animal dung and burn that, which should be put on the fields to fertilise the crops, which again, you know, it's a vicious circle. There's no short term answer there. Everything has got to be very long term. I mean obviously, if there is a famine you've got to ship food in there, but that's not going to cure the problems.*

GERRY *Then, you can say that we're the civilised world, but probably we're also the fortunate ones in being in a temperate climate, we've got...*

LINDA *Well, you can thank your lucky stars that you were born...*

GERRY *Yes, I know, but because things do favour us a hell of a lot more, we've managed to go streets ahead of those areas that are living in more arid areas, or...*

Q. So you'd reckon, anyway, that if Ethiopia were to become economically "developed", then they'd be able to learn to cope with these environmental problems.

GERRY *Well, hopefully they'd be able to get their agriculture in some sort of order then. The problem is that too many people are just living a basic living from the land. They scratch a living so there are populations that are 99% farmers, or gatherers there, that live from the land. If they were economically... well, that's the other problem. What can they produce as a country? You know, we've evolved over like 200 years with our kind of industrial revolution if you like to get where we are today. It won't happen in twenty years in these third world countries. I think of a developing third world country, in fact I suppose you can't call them third world any more, but Egypt perhaps — down there they are starting to do incredible things with their deserts in areas. The damming systems there they are getting now from the Nile, they are starting to bring life back to areas that were well farmed in one time. They are now starting to go back and control these areas. It's incredible that they are now starting to bring livestock back into these areas as well, although it's funny to see cattle farmed under sheltered areas, they are starting to get them back out there to get it all working again.*

Q. It's interesting that you're so confident about technology being able to solve these things, given the money, because my thesis is turning out to a large extent to be about the difference between these two views — of controlling nature, or of trying to be part of it, and working with it...

LINDA *Well, I think that we need to study nature and be more part of it, because with trying to control it... I think that most of our problems are that we try to control it, and we're just banging our heads up against a brick wall, and the more we do, the worse the problems get. We might have a small success on one hand, but then we create some dirty great other problem on the other.*

THE AIM HERE is not to say whether these relationships identified between meat production and our environment are true or false, good or bad. The significance is simply that in a remarkable number of ways, in expert discourse as in everyday communication,



meat is linked to a range of ecological concerns, and is often characterised as the villain of the piece. To understand the association, it is necessary to look beyond the scientific particular, to the cultural general. As Mary Douglas notes, the growth of ecological concerns is partly a symbolic process whereby unease with anti-social behaviour — in this case possibly industrial and economic behaviour which threatens our common security — is expressed through whatever medium is immediately appropriate:

Another misunderstanding concerns the distinction between true and false ideas about the environment. I repeat the invitation to approach this subject in a spirit of science fiction. The scientists find out true, objective things about physical nature. The human society invests these findings with social meaning... Pollution ideas, however they arise, are the necessary support for a social system. How else can people induce each other to cooperate and behave if they cannot threaten with time, money, God and nature? These moral imperatives arise from social intercourse (Douglas, 1975: 242).

The invocation of environmental pollution, as with personal health, are thus to be seen as indicative of wider social concerns. I do not suggest that the ecological concerns are not valid, indeed urgent, any more than I would suggest that meat is not a nutritious substance. But the practical reasoning by which we rationalise our ideas is not the only message carried by meat's incrimination in ecological degradation, and the carefully proven causal relationships isolated by environmental scientists are not necessarily the most effective ways to stimulate a response from the public:

In a sense the obvious risk to the environment is a distraction... we can never ask for a future society in which we can only believe in real, scientifically proved pollution dangers. We *must* talk threateningly about time, money, God and nature if we hope to get anything done. We must believe in the limitations and boundaries of nature which our community projects (Douglas, 1975: 245-6).

But why is meat such a *focus* of environmental concerns, which by their very nature are complex systems of infinite elements and interrelationships? Why, for example, was the contamination of lamb by radioactive fallout so uniquely highlighted in the aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear power station accident? The answer is clearly in part that meat production *does* place greater strain on the planet's resources than production of the equivalent food value from non-animal sources — on average it uses far more land, more energy, more hours of labour, and directly or indirectly it produces far more polluting wastes. And the meat from slaughtered sheep



*did* contain a higher concentration of radioactive contaminant than vegetable matter by dint of being higher on the food chain.

But such rational responses do not tell the full story. Meat is also particularly indicted in such concerns since the consumption of the flesh of animals is in any case a recognised expression of our control of nature — a goal society has long valued highly. Meat continues to convey this meaning, but the idea resonates less positively in a world increasingly aware of the impact of human activity. Where meat was once an almost universally esteemed proof of human dominion over a savage and uncivilised environment, it has increasingly been represented in terms of abuse of our position of responsibility for a finite and fragile planet. Now, metaphorically, it represents also the fallibility of even our most advanced technologies, as exemplified by nuclear catastrophes.

Meat eating has long been a symbol by which the success of our traditional quest for power over nature has been tangibly demonstrated. But as concern at the destructive excesses of industrial domination of the planet has grown, so refusing to eat the flesh of other animals has therefore also become an ideal exemplar through which to express a preference for more benign human activity. It is as if there are two essential attitudes in our thinking. Each seeks to use science to understand nature, the first in order to overpower it, and the other in order to work with it. Today these two outlooks as to the best way forward for human society exist side-by-side. They are, however, in many respects mutually incompatible, and the tension between them finds expression in countless forms. One such form is our feelings about food. For representing both views, meat is a Natural Symbol.



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## Conclusions

THIS STUDY OF MEAT as a social phenomenon in British society has used two kinds of data. Firstly there is "hard" archaeological or statistical evidence of people's eating habits, and about the medical risks and benefits of meat consumption. And secondly, there is what people say or write — their opinions. This may or may not coincide with the former sort of fact. It may seem more ephemeral, but is in fact equally real and indispensable to understanding the first sort of evidence. Indeed, what people think to be true may if anything be *more* significant than "facts", since belief is what governs current and future consumption. Let us review each in turn.

The first, statistical, sort of evidence is less abundant than might be supposed. We can be reasonably certain that most pre-historic peoples consumed some meat, whether hunted or farmed, just as most societies do today. The actual quantity typically eaten by our ancestors is however more difficult to ascertain. It may well have been similar to that in many modern subsistence societies where meat forms a minor proportion of the diet even though it may be highly valued.

Written records — for example of taxation and of recipes — give a slightly clearer picture of eating habits around the Middle Ages, when animal flesh seems to have been highly esteemed, although perhaps not yet to the extent enjoyed later. At this time, for most people, meat was consumed in small quantities or only occasionally, almost as a by-product of the process of rearing animals primarily for dairy produce and for their labour. Many modern dishes such as pizza and pasta, paella and risotto, shepherd's pie and stovies, owe their origins to traditional peasant dishes in which a large amount of a staple crop was made appetising with a little meat and vegetable flavouring.

More accurate documentary evidence of meat production and sales is available for the early modern period. The most interesting feature is a substantial increase in meat



consumption by most British people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Advances in refrigeration and transport technology in the late nineteenth century encouraged rising demand by enabling meat to be brought in cheaply from overseas. The upward trend reached a peak in the early twentieth century, after which no major further increase occurred. Wartime fluctuations obscure clear trends, but there are signs that overall demand, far from increasing, has actually begun to decline. Average figures, for example, disguise such facts as falling demand for red meats in the late twentieth century, and a steady increase in numbers of people refusing to eat meat altogether. This has been partially offset by a small further increase in consumption by some meat eaters, particularly in meals eaten away from the home, mainly in fast food establishments.

Nutrition is similarly short on absolute fact. Much is written on the healthiness of meat eating, either extolling its virtues or deploring its debilitating consequences, but little can be said with certainty. We do know that humans have existed for many thousands of years with some animal flesh in their diets, and that some societies such as the Arctic Inuit have lived on a diet of little else. This suggests that meat cannot be quite as pernicious in terms of health as some of its more extreme detractors argue. On the other hand, there is a large body of evidence that suggests high consumption of meat — particularly of the modern intensively-reared variety — may have a price.

JUST AS SIGNIFICANT as such empirical evidence, however, are social facts: the things which people write, say, and believe. For example, the fact that Western society has traditionally used the beginnings of hunting as an indicator of the origins of humanity itself, and still characterises early human beings as primarily hunters and therefore eaters of large amounts of meat, is very real evidence of our modern beliefs if not of our prehistoric habits. This is but one piece in the jigsaw of evidence which suggests that meat's pre-eminence in our food system derives primarily from it tangibly representing to us the principle of human power over nature. In this case the inherent message is that we only became civilised when we began to exercise our ability to dominate other creatures by killing and eating them.

This meaning is a persistent thread which runs through context after context associated with meat in Western society. The depth to which our aversion to cannibalism extends, to the point that many of us would literally prefer to die than "descend" to eating human flesh, illustrates the absolute distinction which we have traditionally drawn



between non-edible people and edible animals (a title from which we normally exempt ourselves). Our aversion to eating pets or other creatures which we see as being too close to ourselves conforms to the same distinction.

The notion of environmental control also provides the context for the rational reasons to which we impute our carnivorism, or our distaste for meat. The value judgements which underpin our economic system regulating meat production and consumption are strongly governed by this idea. So are our beliefs, reinforced by medical specialists, as to whether or not it is healthy for us in body and in mind to eat much meat. Our ethical principles concerning the proper treatment of non-human animals, including the justifiability of consuming them for food, are also clearly influenced by our view of the correct relationship of humans to the environment in general; and this is likewise a central theme in the modern debate on ecological threats to our continued existence as a species, in which meat is regularly implicated.

A PICTURE EMERGES of meat as a symbol by which Western society — like many other societies — has expressed its relationship to the world that it inhabits. Through most of our history, and indeed prehistory, people have experienced a need to control their environment: to mitigate the threat from the elements and from wild animals, and to ensure some stability in the supply of food and other necessities of life. In this context, it seems appropriate that for most subsistence societies, and certainly in mediaeval Europe, the prevailing use of meat appears to have been as an esteemed supplement to the basic diet of grains and vegetables. Principal exceptions to this rule have been those who particularly sought political and economic power, who seem to have consumed meat in greater than average quantities, and those who shunned earthly power for spiritual reasons and accordingly shunned meat as well.

It is also fitting that, in most people's diets, meat should have risen in both quantity consumed and in significance from around the seventeenth century onwards, at a time when science was increasingly stressing the need to dominate nature, morally abetted by mechanistic philosophers who portrayed non-human animals as little more than sophisticated machines. Whereas environmental control might previously have been a basic necessity for most people making a living from the land, to an unprecedented extent it now became an ethical imperative for the rapidly urbanising society. Meat provided the ideal expression by which the power of human industry could be demonstrated.



However, even as this new ethic was rising to prominence, some were also rejecting the tenets of that prevailing philosophy. As urban society came to have less and less daily contact with the environment on which it ultimately depended, a significant minority of people became concerned at excessive abuses of human power. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the foundation of nature reserves, of societies for the protection of animals, and of vegetarian movements, as refusal to eat meat on moral grounds became no longer the preserve of the devout.

In the twentieth century the tension between these alternative positions has continued, and their relative influences go a long way towards explaining our modern views of meat. If anything, indeed, the arguments have fragmented and polarised, with the growth of extreme militancy in defence of animals on the one hand, and on the other the intensive industrialisation of meat supply whereby animals are reared from conception to slaughter on a production line which makes few concessions to their creature comforts.

THE MEAT INDUSTRY is currently in a state of considerable uncertainty. Many producers regard themselves as almost under siege, on account of the rapid changes which have occurred in British consumer preferences in recent years. These reflect conflicting messages coming from the proponents of alternative views of the meat system, which in turn correspond to alternative views of the nature of human society.

On the one hand there is the radical view that meat eating is inherently either unhealthy, or unethical, or both. On the other, the orthodox view is still that meat is nutritious and even necessary, except when it is too high in saturated fat content or is excessively contaminated by salmonella, listeria, BST, hormone residues, antibiotic residues, or whatever the latest concern may be. The pattern, however, is not so simple.

Over-the-counter sales of red meat — the epitome of meat — have fallen rapidly. Increasingly, producers have had to divorce their products from associations with the flesh of real, live animals in order to maintain customer acceptability, particularly among the younger generation. A plethora of prepared and processed products is the result. In the process, however, the industry may well have sown the seeds of an even greater problem for themselves. Heavily advertised “coated nuggets” and exotic vacuum-packed dishes have persuaded consumers to continue buying meat in various new forms, but have also



consolidated many people's disinclination to deal directly with raw flesh. The danger for meat producers is that there may be little further potential for disguising the product, and little prospect of convincing an increasingly squeamish public to return to the old ways. Meat sales have become increasingly dependent upon those whose faith in the industrial economy is largely untarnished but should that faith be damaged the food industry in general, and meat industry in particular, may be in a highly vulnerable position.

THE STING IN THE TAIL is that a collapse of consumer confidence in the products of the industrial food industry looks increasingly possible. Meat sales, particularly of the most emotive red meats, have clearly already suffered by being associated as a symbol of human domination of the planet in general — a process which is seen by many as having gone too far. The number of people choosing to eat less meat or no meat at all has increased in parallel with the growth of ecological concerns to the point that, as this goes to print, a survey by the Food Research Association has suggested that almost half the population of Britain is trying to avoid eating meat. Numbers of vegetarians are predicted to double "in the near future" (*Guardian*, 25 October 1989: 5; BBC Ceefax news, 24 October 1989: 109).

These changes are stimulated by unmistakable evidence of severe environmental, and consequently social, damage in countless areas together with a growing awareness of the possibility of imminent ecological catastrophe on an unprecedented scale. Today, ecological and ethical issues are at the top of the political agenda, with destruction of the ozone layer worrying more Britons than poverty, and cruelty to animals having become a more widespread concern than either the threat of nuclear war or inner city deprivation (MORI poll, *Times*, 25 Oct. 1989: 4). But in a world locked into a seemingly unbreakable cycle of economic growth, defined by ever-increasing production and consumption of material resources, there is every likelihood that environmental crises may become more obvious, more frequent, and more severe in the foreseeable future.

There are two typical responses to environmental crises. One is to regard individual ecological problems in isolation as the result of inadequate scientific understanding and poor control, and to seek to rectify them by further applications of industrial technology. This is the characteristic response of those who adhere to the tenets of recent Western industrial culture, who view the world as an infinite resource and a challenge to be overcome. In this view, archetypically, humans are a species set apart, unconstrained by the physical limitations of other animals, and unique in our capacity to



modify the world to the blueprint of our choice. Such believers typically have faith in the ability of science and technology to find solutions to any and every problem, whilst continuing to provide the material comforts to which we in the West have become accustomed. Amongst individuals of this persuasion, who remain the majority, meat continues to fulfil its traditional function of exemplifying that value of human pre-eminence and — health scares apart — remains popular.

At the other pole of opinion are those who regard the environmental crises as inherent in our current cultural constitution, who see individual ecological problems not in isolation but as inter-related symptoms of a wider malaise, and who believe that only by adopting a more empathetic approach to our dealings with the planet — including recognition that the non-human environment upon which we ultimately depend has needs which may sometimes by necessity over-ride our demands — can catastrophic deterioration in local and global ecosystems be averted. It is amongst such people that the reputation of meat, as a continuing symbol of human domination of nature, has suffered most severely.

Society is not, of course, literally divided into two camps. Rather there is a tension between these two orientations, which seems likely only to heighten in years to come, as threats to the global ecology and consequently to humans' quality of life, worsen. The effects of the increased influence of a more sympathetic and empathetic train of thought are already visible — not merely in the rising popularity of vegetarianism but also, for example, in increased demand for organic and free-range meats; in rising demand for white meats in preference to red meats; in demands for more humane and natural treatment of farmed animals; in militancy towards practices regarded by some as unnecessarily cruel such as hunting and vivisection; and — not least — in the new public perception of all meat as at least slightly unhealthy in various ways, in contrast to its traditional image as essential, vital nutrition.

It is impossible to predict the future with any certainty. But it seems likely that the prospects for the meat industry will be substantially conditioned by how far this more benign view of the correct relationship between humans and our environment continues to gain in influence over the recently prevailing industrial view. Should the consensus of opinion in future society dictate that nature must be dealt with more sensitively, meat may well continue to be used as an expression of our relationship to our environment, and its social acceptability fall as a consequence. It is at least possible that, in this way, in some years time meat eating could come to have an image comparable to that of, say, smoking or drug addiction today — as a relatively vulgar, unhealthy and anti-social indulgence.



History shows that public values can and do change so that, for example, a practice such as slavery which was once generally acceptable and regarded as entirely normal can instead come to be widely regarded with horror — as a sign not of high civilisation, but of barbaric brutality. There is no self-evident reason that our consumption of the flesh of other animals should be immune from a similar process. Eating meat has long been a symbol by which we have expressed our society's quest for dominance. Its diminishing reputation might also be symptomatic of the wane of outdated ideals. Meat may continue to be a Natural Symbol, if its decline marks the evolution of new values.



# Appendix 1: Facsimile of street Questionnaire

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# MEAT

## A NATURAL SYMBOL

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